



NVAO • THE NETHERLANDS

INITIAL ACCREDITATION

WO-MASTER

SOCIETAL TRANSITIONS

Erasmus University Rotterdam

FULL REPORT

25 OCTOBER 2022

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1 Peer review

The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) determines the quality of a new programme on the basis of a peer review. This initial accreditation procedure is required when an institution wishes to award a recognised degree after the successful completion of a study programme.

The procedure for new programmes differs slightly from the approach to existing programmes that have already been accredited. Initial accreditation is in fact an ex ante assessment of a programme. Once accredited the new programme becomes subject to the regular review process.

The quality of a new programme is assessed by means of peer review. A panel of independent peers including a student reviews the plans during a site visit to the institution. A discussion amongst peer experts forms the basis for the panel's final judgement and the advisory report. The agenda for the panel visit and the documents reviewed are available from the NVAO office upon request.

The outcome of this peer review is based on the standards described and published in the limited NVAO Assessment framework for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands (Stcrt. 2019, nr. 3198). Each standard is judged on a three-point scale: meets, does not meet or partially meets the standard. The panel will reach a conclusion about the quality of the programme, also on a three-point scale: positive, conditionally positive or negative.

NVAO takes an accreditation decision on the basis of the full report. Following a positive NVAO decision with or without conditions the institution can proceed to offer the new programme.

This report contains the findings, analysis and judgements of the panel resulting from the peer review. It also details the commendations as well as recommendations for follow-up actions. A summary report with the main outcomes of the peer review is also available.

Both the full and summary reports of each peer review are published on NVAO's website www.nvao.net. There you can also find more information on NVAO and peer reviews of new programmes.

Because of COVID-19 temporary measures apply for this peer review.

2 New programme

2.1 General data

Institution	Erasmus University Rotterdam
Programme	Wo-master Societal Transitions
Variants	Fulltime
Degree	Master of Arts
Tracks	Not applicable
Locations	Rotterdam
Study load	60 EC ¹
Field of study	Gedrag en Maatschappij

2.2 Profile

The master programme Societal Transitions focuses on societal transitions for a sustainable future from a socio-economic perspective, based on transition science, the philosophy of change and normative dimensions of sustainability. The programme trains students to become transformative leaders based on four competences: think, connect, act and reflect (TCAR). Graduates are able to translate knowledge in complex contexts into actual actions and interventions, and are expected to take a leading role in guiding and accelerating societal and sustainable transitions. The proposed programme answers to a demand from the working field for professionals who can connect theory and practice and can develop and implement practical interventions in the field of sustainability and transitions. The programme has its own unique signature and distinguishes itself from comparable programmes by the focus on socio-economic and institutional dimensions of societal transitions and the competence-based approach. The proposed programme will be offered by the Erasmus University Rotterdam and is hosted by the Erasmus School of Philosophy, in close collaboration with the Design Impact Transitions (DIT) platform.

2.3 Panel

Peer experts

- Prof. dr. Frank Witlox (chair), head of department and senior full professor of Economic Geography at the Department of Geography at Ghent University;
- Prof. dr. John Grin, full professor of Public Policy and Governance, in particular system innovation, Department of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam, and until 1 September 2022, interim scientific director of the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR);
- Prof. dr. Paul Hekkert, full professor of Form Theory and head of research, faculty of Industrial Design Engineering, Delft University of Technology;
- Alex Tess Rutten MA (student member), recently graduated in the Master Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam.

Assisting staff

- Ikrame Faris MSc (secretary)
- Thomas de Bruijn (NVAO policy advisor and process coordinator)

Site visit

Rotterdam, 30 September 2022

¹ European Credits

3 Outcome

The NVAO approved panel reaches a positive conclusion regarding the quality of the Master Societal Transitions offered by Erasmus University Rotterdam. The programme complies with all standards of the limited NVAO framework.

The master programme Societal Transitions has established a challenging and interesting profile that will enable graduates to become *transformative leaders* who are able to translate knowledge from a wide range of academic disciplines into actual actions and interventions to create fair and sustainable transitions. There is a high demand for professionals who can bridge the gap between theory and practice and who can fulfil leading roles in realizing societal transitions. The intended learning outcomes of the programme are up-to-date and well aligned with (international) professional needs, demands and standards. Various stakeholders, notably representatives of the professional field, were consulted in the process of developing the programme. The panel recommends to safeguard continued and sustainable involvement of the professional field, for example by installing an Advisory Board.

Strong elements of the teaching-learning environment include the quality of the teaching staff, the didactic concept of *transformative learning* and the design of the curriculum. The proposed system of study guidance is appropriate for a master's degree and the programme offers necessary facilities that students can make use of during their studies. The panel strongly advises the programme to invest in proper recruitment and marketing strategies to attract prospective students from various backgrounds. The presence of a diverse learning environment is considered to be a key prerequisite to realize the ambitions of the programme. Given the diversity in the composition of the teaching staff, the panel also recommends to organize frequent calibration sessions and to invest in team-building activities to strengthen coherence among teaching staff members.

The programme has proposed a sound and transparent system of student assessment, based on the educational vision of competence development. The Examination Board fulfills an important role in ensuring the quality of (final) examinations. The assessment policy of the programme describes various measures for enhancing the reliability and validity of examinations. The panel urges to create further alignment between the Examination Board and the management team with regard to the system of assessment. This point of attention can be taken into consideration as part of the process of revising the assessment policy, that is currently taking place.

Standard	Judgement
1. Intended learning outcomes	Meets the standard
2. Teaching-learning environment	Meets the standard
3. Student assessment	Meets the standard
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>Positive</i>

4 Commendations

The programme is commended for the following features of good practice.

1. Societal and scientific need – The programme addresses an important societal and scientific need in the field of sustainability and transitions. The panel compliments the programme's innovative approach and considers it timely and much needed.
2. Expertise of teaching staff – The teaching staff is characterized by professionalism, enthusiasm and dedication. The staff members bring in a wide array of expertise from various disciplines. Their vast experience instils confidence in their ability to create a stimulating learning environment.
3. Didactic approach – The didactic concept of transformative learning is considered highly appropriate and suitable to achieve the ambitions of the programme.
4. Involvement of the professional field – Representatives of the professional field have contributed to the development of the new programme and helped to refine the ultimate graduate profile.
5. Mix of assessment methods – The adoption of both summative and formative assessments within the programme fits the educational vision regarding competence development.

5 Recommendations

For further improvement to the programme, the panel recommends a number of follow-up actions.

1. Involvement of the professional field – Safeguard continued and sustainable involvement of the professional field, for example by installing an Advisory Board.
2. Composition student population – Invest in proper recruitment and marketing strategies to attract students from different (academic) backgrounds.
3. Coherence teaching staff – Strengthen coherence within the diverse teaching staff by organizing frequent calibration sessions and investing in team-building activities.
4. Alignment Examination Board and management – Create further alignment between the Examination Board and the programme management with regard to the system of assessment of a student's accomplishment of the programme learning objectives.

6 Assessment

6.1 Standard 1: Intended learning outcomes

The intended learning outcomes tie in with the level and orientation of the programme; they are geared to the expectations of the professional field, the discipline, and international requirements.

Judgement

Meets the standard.

Findings, analysis and considerations

Societal issues, such as climate change or the energy crisis, are inherently complex and systemic and are additionally challenged by their global dimension. The long-term viability of policies and solutions to address these issues is increasingly contested. The main objective of the master programme Societal Transitions (MST) is to educate students to address complex societal challenges by acquiring knowledge from a wide range of academic disciplines and developing practice-oriented competences that allow for fair and sustainable transitions. The programme is grounded in the field of transition research and is driven by the philosophy that in order to deal with these complex problems (i) gaining academic knowledge from various disciplines is needed, complemented by (ii) academically sound methodology and (iii) the development of competences that are necessary to realize societal transitions. In order to train professionals that can propose new and sustainable alternatives, the programme relies on three principles: interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity, and transformation. Because the objects of societal transitions are interconnected and encompass a broad range of (policy) domains, students learn to adopt an integrative approach and synthesize various types of knowledge from different perspectives, with action research methodology and design thinking at the core. In this respect, the master Societal Transitions distinguishes itself from comparable programmes by focusing on socio-economic and institutional dimensions of societal transitions, including the role of power, culture, beliefs, values and social movements. For this, the programme will build on the expertise of multiple schools and institutes of Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR). The master programme reflects the ambition of the EUR to create positive societal impact and is considered a flagship project of the university's strategic platform Design, Impact, Transition (DIT).

The panel is charmed by the rationale behind the programme. It considers the focus on socio-economic and institutional dimensions of societal transitions and the interplay between theory and practice strong and distinctive features of the programme, contributing to its unique positioning within the domain of sustainability and transitions in the Dutch educational landscape. During the visit, the management expressed its intent to establish collaborations with the Delft University of Technology. The panel welcomes this ambition and believes that the collaboration can aid in including a technical dimension to the programme.

The envisioned graduate profile is defined as the *transformative leader*: graduates are able to operate effectively in a complex context of structural uncertainties, beyond traditional frameworks and organizational boundaries, to realize societal transitions. This calls for a specific set of skills and competences. Graduates are required to navigate and mediate between different needs and interests, challenge existing structures and create momentum for new and sustainable interventions. The programme does not train students for a specific job, but instead prepares them for leadership roles to guide and realize societal transitions. The profile of a transformative leader consists of four competences: (1) Think- *understand & analyze*, (2) Connect- *collaborate & facilitate*, (3) Act- *experiment & transform* and (4) Reflect- *learn & adapt*. The TCAR-competences are interconnected and reinforce each other. Each competence is translated into four indicators that refer to the proficiency requirements as formulated in the NLQF7, with the exception of the competence 'reflect'. This competence is explicitly included to demonstrate the importance of a reflexive attitude.

The panel establishes that the end-qualifications are in line with the requirements at master level and fit the competence-based graduate profile. Based on the application file and discussions with representatives from the professional field, the panel found that the *transformative leader* profile was based on thorough labour market research and echoes labour market demands for professionals that are able to translate knowledge in complex contexts into actual actions and interventions. The panel, therefore, determines that the TCAR-competences do justice to both the theoretical and practical orientation of the programme. In the discussion with representatives of the professional field, the competence of *acting* was specifically lauded and is expected to be of added value in

the domain of sustainability and transitions. The panel was pleased to establish that representatives of the professional field were consulted in the process of developing the programme. The involvement of the working field consisted of input with regard to the graduate profile, based on own experiences and labour market developments. The panel commends the role of the involved actors and advises the programme to safeguard continued and sustainable involvement of the professional field, for example by installing an Advisory Board. This will aid in adjusting the programme to evolving needs within the sector.

In sum, the panel concludes that it is highly appreciative of the efforts by the Erasmus University Rotterdam to develop a programme that addresses an important scientific and societal need in the field of sustainability and societal transitions. The programme has established an interesting and challenging set of intended learning outcomes that equips graduates to fulfill leading roles in creating fair and sustainable solutions to societal challenges. The professional field were consulted in the development of the programme and helped to refine the graduate profile of the transformative leader. Based on these observations, the panel concludes that this standard is met.

6.2 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.

Judgement

Meets the standard.

Findings, analysis and considerations

The master Societal Transitions is a one year full-time programme of 60 EC. The curriculum design is aimed at guiding students in the process of becoming transformative leaders. Building upon Mezirow's model of transformative learning, in five modules, students gain knowledge and understanding of complex contexts, system thinking and social learning processes from different perspectives. This is combined with the development of competences that evoke transformative action, such as experimentation, (re)invention and reflection. To optimize the student learning journey and to facilitate the process of transformative learning, the programme strives to create a diverse learning environment. For this purpose, the programme attempts to admit students from different disciplinary backgrounds. The programme is admissible for students who hold a university bachelor's degree and can demonstrate their suitability through a motivation letter.

The panel admires the didactical approach of transformative learning and finds it highly apt for the ambitions of the programme. It shares the view that the composition of the student population is crucial to foster peer-learning and to create cross-pollination between students. Since the Course and Examination Regulations (CER) indicates that entry requirements are not selective, the panel advises to be particularly attentive to the marketing and recruitment strategies in order to attract students from different (academic) backgrounds. It found the management's suggestion to make use of the intended collaboration with the Technical University of Delft an interesting way to balance modest marketing during the first years with promoting disciplinary width of the student body.

The programme starts with the mandatory course *Confronting (un)sustainability* (5 EC) in which students are introduced to the various perspectives of addressing urban sustainability challenges, such as waste or energy. The programme is continued with four additional compulsory courses (20 EC), focusing on sustainability challenges in an urban context, theoretical understanding of the dynamics and mechanisms of societal transitions, normative theories (in ethics) and transformative methods. In addition, students can choose 2 elective courses (10 EC) offered by the EUR. Specific electives tailored to the programme will be developed within the next two years through the DIT platform. Parallel to these courses, two tracks run throughout the programme: a *reflection track* of 6 EC and a *leadership development track* of 4 EC. These tracks focus respectively on the student's learning journey by reflecting on experiences during the programme, using instruments such as journaling and the process towards becoming active leaders for societal transitions. For this, students will get acquainted with academic leadership theories and devise their own narrative to their desired role, which is ultimately reflected in the graduation project.

The panel finds the curriculum to be carefully thought-out. Its design aids in the progressive building of the necessary knowledge and competences to achieve the transformative leader profile. The panel understands the strategic choice for focusing on socio-economic and institutional dimensions of transitions, but advises to explore additional possibilities to include technical aspects of transitions in the curriculum. From the discussion with the teaching staff, the panel gathered that this is now primarily facilitated by providing guest lectures and elective courses. Prior to the visit, the panel was also provided with a detailed programme schedule that included information per course on the amount of lectures and working groups, the study load and the form of assessment (including deadlines). Based on this information, the panel is positive about the feasibility of the programme. At the suggestion of the representatives from the working field, the panel finally recommends to incorporate real-life cases in the courses to reflect actual developments within the domain of sustainability and transitions. The representatives of the professional field are keen to make a contribution in this regard.

The programme is concluded with a graduation project of 15 EC, that integrates all courses and brings the TCAR-competences together. In four phases, students jointly develop a strategic intervention for a real-life societal transition. The *preparatory phase* starts in the leadership development track in which students think about the role they wish to fulfill as transformative leaders. In the *exploration and framing phase* a transition challenge is approached and investigated based on system understanding. The *design and action phase* facilitates several co-creation sessions with peers and stakeholders to identify problem areas and design potential solutions. In the last phase, the outcomes of the project are *made public* and discussed with students, teachers and stakeholders. The panel positively evaluates the graduation project and appreciates that the project is designed as a collective learning experience for all actors involved.

The panel considers the programme management and teaching staff well-equipped to implement and coordinate the programme. The composition of the teaching staff reflects the involvement of different schools and institutes of the Erasmus University in the programme. The diversity in the composition of the teaching staff is considered a strong asset by the panel. Due to the challenging learning environment and the need for proper guidance, lecturers were not only selected based on their academic performance, but also on their teaching experience in inter- and transdisciplinary programmes. Teachers are systematically trained in their teaching and assessment skills through the University Teaching Qualification (UTQ), and receive additional training to fulfill their roles as coaches and supervisors. The panel was impressed by the expertise and the enthusiasm of the teaching staff, who seem very invested in making this new programme work and have a shared vision on the teaching-learning environment. During the discussion, the panel was informed that several calibration sessions were organized to ensure alignment between lecturers throughout the programme. The panel is appreciative of these efforts and recommends to keep investing in these sessions and other forms of community-building activities to (further) strengthen team coherence. Finally, it also requests the management to be mindful of the increase in the workload for lecturers, should the influx of students exceed initial expectations.

The programme offers the necessary support and study guidance for students. A particularly important role is reserved for coaches, who provide guidance and constructive feedback to students throughout the programme. The panel was pleased to be informed that teachers will receive training to prepare for this role. Extra support and guidance is offered by the study counsellor of ESPhil. In addition, students can draw on university-wide facilities, such as the career service, student support services and training services. The panel deems the proposed level of study guidance appropriate for a master degree.

The language of instruction is English. The programme management substantiates this choice by arguing that the profile of the programme and the internationally diverse influx of students who will be working in a global labour market, necessitate an English-taught programme. The teaching staff has sufficient command of the English language. The panel supports the considerations of the management and finds the name of the programme equally appropriate. Nonetheless, it emphasizes to be mindful of the challenges and limitations that ensue from the use of English in the local and regional context (for example during internships). The programme management explained in the discussion that these risks will partly be mitigated by ensuring the involvement of Dutch-speaking students in the project.

Students can make use of the excellent facilities present on the Woudestein Campus of the Erasmus University. Particularly impressive are the amenities provided by the DIT platform spaces, which give students access to a

creative and entrepreneurial atmosphere. The digital learning environment, Canvas, is also deemed of adequate quality. Based on the information provided, the panel determines that the proper infrastructure is in place to provide students with a stimulating learning environment.

In sum, the panel is convinced that the programme offers a strong teaching-learning environment. The didactic approach, content of the curriculum and high quality of the teaching staff are impressive and will enable incoming students to achieve the intended learning outcomes. The study guidance and available facilities are adequate and appropriate. To further improve the teaching-learning environment for students, the panel has shared suggestions with regard to the recruitment of prospective students and the strengthening of coherence among teaching staff members. As a whole, the panel judges this standard as met.

6.3 Standard 3: Student assessment

The programme has an adequate system of student assessment in place.

Judgement

Meets the standard.

Findings, analysis and considerations

The system of assessment of the master programme Societal Transitions is guided by the assessment policy of the Erasmus School of Philosophy. The panel was informed that the assessment policy is currently under revision. One of the main focuses of the revision concerns the alignment of the structure of the assessment system with the educational vision regarding competence development. The assessment policy of MST is based on the principles of integrative and programmatic assessment, which involves the integration of assessment, learning and meaningful feedback. This approach allows for the evaluation of a student's learning process as well as the achievement of the desired learning outcomes at the completion of a course and the programme as a whole. Rather than concentrating the evaluation in fixed assessment weeks, the programme chooses to evaluate sequentially. From this stems that only a limited number of resits is offered. The panel considers the assessment policy of the Erasmus School of Philosophy and its translation to the programme sound and clear. It finds the adoption of both summative and formative assessment suitable given the educational philosophy of the programme. It values the stimulation of learning within a framework that disconnects decision-making based on a single assessment method, and instead uses meaningful feedback to encourage student development and learning. Because the decision-making process builds upon evaluation indications throughout the year, the panel does not foresee risks or irregularities with regard to the resit-policy. The panel was pleased to hear that the new programme is actively involved in the revision process.

From the approach that assessment is not solely focused on application of knowledge but also on demonstration and performance on competences of a transformative leader, follows that a wide variety of assessment forms is employed. The programme makes use of papers, presentations, games, group activities and projects. The assessment rubric describes the assessment criteria for different evaluation forms as well as the way competences are assessed. The assessment information is included in the programme manual and is discussed prior to the start of a course or track. Meaningful feedback plays a key role within the programme. The portfolio system, which showcases the student's learning curve, contains the feedback and grades of the core courses, elective and tracks, the feedback of teachers, peers and stakeholders and the advice of the coaches. Calibration sessions will be organized for teachers on giving and receiving feedback and competence development assessment. The panel has reviewed the assessment forms and rubrics of the programme and is positive about the (mix of) assessment methods. It does, however, recommend to safeguard the objective assessment of the individual performance of students in the evaluation process. The panel endorses the view of the programme that calibration sessions are important to ensure a shared vision on and consistency in assessment.

Students graduate when they are successfully assessed on the competences and indicators linked to the profile of the transformative leader. The assessment of the graduation project is based on the information of the students' portfolio, including the grade of the presentation and discussion of the graduation project. Students are assessed by a supervisor and an advisor. Stakeholders who have been involved in the graduation project can have an advisory role in the evaluation process, but do not have assessment authority. The panel positively evaluates (the assessment of) the graduation project and determines that it meets master level requirements. If possible, the

panel advises to reflect the interdisciplinary character of the programme in the evaluation process of the graduation project.

The master programme Societal Transitions will fall under the responsibility of the Examination Board (EB) of the Erasmus School of Philosophy. To accommodate and ensure the interdisciplinary nature of the master programme, the EB will appoint a separate secretary for MST. The secretary brings in expertise on transdisciplinary education and competence development assessment. The EB confirmed to the panel that it was involved in the development of the programme. The Board has reviewed previous versions of the application file, including proposals for the design of the assessment system. Based on the discussion with the Examination Board, the panel determines that there is a disconnect between the vision of the programme management and the EB on the assessment system. The EB has expressed concerns on the possible implications of programmatic assessment (which relies heavily on feedback), the amount of group work and the evaluation of interdisciplinarity. The panel believes that the novelty of the assessment system is at the base of the differing views and that proper alignment between the management and EB is required. The panel has no reservations with regard to the assessment policy in itself and finds it fitting for the educational vision of the programme. The panel was pleased to be informed by both the management and the EB that they are currently in the process of discussion and adjustment, as part of the revision of the assessment policy. The panel is confident in the positive outcome of this process.

Validity, reliability and transparency are guaranteed in several ways, for example by using clear assessment criteria for graded assignments in the form of rubrics, by organizing regular calibration sessions and by providing clear information on examinations in programme manuals and guidelines. The panel is positive that these procedures safeguard high quality in assessment. Also, the role of the Programme Committee (PC) in the quality assurance process will aid in continuous improvement of the programme.

The panel concludes that the master programme has a sound and transparent system of assessment in place. The vision on assessment and the assessment principles suit the programme and are translated properly into several (policy) documents. A wide variety of assessment methods is deployed and validity, reliability and transparency are guaranteed by several procedures. The panel established that the EB has the necessary level of independence, fulfills its tasks in line with its statutory duties and together with the PC plays an important role in ensuring assessment quality. The panel also determined that the introduction of programmatic assessment needs further fine-tuning and that the management and EB will benefit from continuous discussion to align the wishes and expectations of both parties. Overall, the panel judges this standard as met.

6.4 Degree and field of study

The panel advises awarding the following degree to the new programme: Master of Arts

The panel supports the programme's preference for the following field of study: Gedrag en Maatschappij

In a letter dated 24 October 2022, the Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) has proposed the panel to classify the master programme Societal Transitions as a unique programme in the assessment schedule. The institution motivates its proposal by arguing that the broad profile of the master programme does not lend itself to a comparison with more monodisciplinary programmes. For two equivalent programmes, the EUR has determined that their timeline does not suit the master programme Societal Transitions.

The panel supports the considerations of the management to classify the M Societal Transitions as a unique programme in the assessment schedule.

Abbreviations

CER	Course and Examination Regulations
DIT	Design, Impact, Transition
EB	Examination Board
EC	European Credit
ESPhil	Erasmus School of Philosophy
EUR	Erasmus University Rotterdam
MSc	Master of Science
MST	Master Societal Transitions
NLQF	Dutch Qualification Framework
NVAO	Netherlands Flanders Accreditation Organization
PC	Programme Committee
TCAR	Think, Connect, Act, Reflect
UTQ	University Teaching Qualification

