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**Research Master
Theology & Religious Studies
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam**

*Report of the limited programme assessment
6 November 2020*

Utrecht, The Netherlands
February 2021
www.AeQui.nl
Assessment Agency for Higher Education

Colophon

Programme

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Research Master

Location: Amsterdam

Mode of study: full-time and part-time

CROHO: 60827

Language of Instruction: English

Result of institutional assessment: positive

Panel

Prof. dr. A. F. de Jong, chair

Prof. dr. M. Sedgwick, domain expert

Prof. dr. M. Schult, domain expert

L. Spoliar MA, student

Dr. J.M. secretary

The panel was presented to the NVAO for approval.

The assessment was conducted under responsibility of

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This document is best printed in duplex

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Summary

On 6 November 2020, an assessment panel of AeQui visited the research master programme Theology and Religious Studies of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The two-year full-time and part-time programme of 120 ECTS has a distinctive and innovative profile in its combination of theological, denominational and social perspectives on theology and religion. It offers students a research-oriented and individualized curriculum, with strong focus on critical dialogue and the self-reflective positioning of the students' convictions in relation to other religious and academic perspectives. The panel judges that the programme meets each standard and therefore concludes that the overall quality of the programme **meets the standard** for a research master programme in Theology and Religious Studies.

Intended learning outcomes

The programme's profile and objectives are aligned with (inter)national expectations for a research master in the domains of Theology and Religious Studies. The programme has a unique profile in the Netherlands, given the manner in which it incorporates theological, denominational and social perspectives on theology and religion, and the way it highlights the hermeneutics of interreligious dialogue. This combination of perspectives is very innovative and can be seen as an example for other universities in Europe and beyond. The programme's exit qualifications are concrete, relevant, up-to-date and of the required level for a research master programme, and also reflect the ambitions of the programme. The panel judges that the programme **meets** this standard.

Teaching-learning environment

The panel is positive about the orientation, contents and teaching philosophy of the programme, and appreciates the tracks offered within the curriculum, which are aligned with the research expertise of staff members. The panel is very impressed with the innovative programme of the VU, with many topics that are relevant and urgent. The programme has been carefully designed and has matured into something that is attractive for international students. According to the panel, the programme offers its students a challenging, inspiring curriculum, which is very flexible and highly student-centred. The panel appreciates the freedom students have to design their own study trajectory by way of specialization courses, electives, classics courses and an internship. There is a clear research orientation throughout the whole of the curriculum. The panel

concludes that students receive the necessary guidance and support for their studies, but also observes that the curriculum is complex and that there are not many courses exclusive to the research master itself. The panel characterizes the teaching staff as dedicated and highly qualified researchers and educators, many of whom are leaders in their field. Students are highly appreciative of the curriculum and their teachers and feel themselves to be very much part of a stimulating, but also safe, learning environment and research community. The programme is selective in admitting students and has a clear intake-procedure that ensures that the level and qualifications of incoming students are aligned with the content and goals of the programme. The panel judges that the programme **meets** this standard.

Student assessment

The panel has established that the assessments of the programme are valid, objective and transparent due to the use of standard assessment forms, adequate communication with students and the implementation of the four-eyes principle in the design of the assessments and the assessment of the internship and thesis. Assessments and the feedback given to students contribute to the students' development and study progression. The panel is positive about the dedication and active involvement of the Examination Board. The panel judges that the programme **meets** this standard.

Achieved learning outcomes

According to the panel, the level of the theses and the academic careers of the students make clear that the programme is able to achieve its intended learning outcomes. Overall, the level of the theses is high.

They are innovative and address a wide range of relevant subjects. The panel considers theses to be examples of advanced and independent research, proving that the students are very well prepared for a PhD-position. Many of the graduates continue their careers as PhD-candidates. The panel points out that students can benefit from the wide denominational network of the Faculty of Religion and Theology in searching for suitable positions outside academia.

Recommendations

To support the programme in its further development, the panel would like to make the following recommendations:

- The panel appreciates the direction in which the programme is developing and encourages it to continue on this path, broadening its scope of perspectives, both confessional and non-confessional, Western and non-Western.
- The panel urges the programme to find ways of ensuring the research master level without raising the study load for research master students following courses in the one-year master.
- The panel recommends that the programme investigate how it might further develop its system of guidance and how it might include more

educational units that are specific to the research master.

- The panel encourages the programme to further develop its assessment protocol for the internships in line with the wide range of possible (non-textual) end products.
- The panel took note of the fact that the thesis can also take on the form of a literature review or an article. It urges the programme to be very clear about the requirements and assessment criteria of the thesis, and to include opportunities for constructive feedback in its assessment matrix.
- As with other research master programme in this field, it is less clear what kind of careers graduates can pursue if they do not find an academic position. The panel encourages the programme to continue to think of ways of preparing students for other careers in which advanced research skills are required. The panel points out that students can benefit from the wide denominational network of the Faculty of Religion and Theology in searching for suitable positions outside academia.

All standards of the NVAO assessment framework (2018) are assessed positively; the assessment committee therefore awards a positive recommendation for the accreditation of the programme.

On behalf of the entire assessment committee,
Utrecht, February 2021

prof. dr. Ab de Jong
Chair

dr. Jesseka Batteau
Secretary

Introduction

This report describes the outcome of the assessment of the Research Master Theology and Religious Studies of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), which took place on 6 November 2020 as part of the cluster-evaluation of the Research Master Programmes of Theology & Religion. VU Amsterdam offers around 175 English-taught programmes at bachelor, master and PhD level to more than 26,000 students, including around 4,000 international students. Currently, it has 3,600 staff members in its employment. The Research Master Theology & Religious Studies programme is a two-year (full-time and part-time) course which trains students to become independent researchers in the broad interdisciplinary fields of theology and religious studies, and position themselves in relation to different academic and denominational perspectives.

The Institute

The Research Master Programme Theology and Religious Studies is part of the independent Faculty of Religion and Theology, one of the nine faculties (including the VUmc of Medical Sciences and the Faculty of Dentistry, a collaboration with the university of Amsterdam) of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The faculty has two departments, (1) Texts and Traditions, with a focus on historical and contemporary sources and the formation of religions and (2) Beliefs and Practices, with a focus on systematic theology and lived religion in all its manifestations. The Faculty offers five programmes; two bachelor programmes, a one-year master programme, a two-year research master programme and a three-year master programme specializing in Christian Ministry. For designated parts of the programmes (a maximum of 40%), the Faculty collaborates with ten associated seminaries.

Recently, the Faculty has changed its name from Faculty of Theology to Faculty of Religion and Theology. This transition included a restructuring of staff and bachelor programmes and was accompanied by ongoing discussions and shared reflection on the status and methodologies of theology and religious studies.

The Programme

The programme is a two-year full-time and part-time research master course, amounting to 120

EC. The programme offers a broad scope of possible fields of study, tailored to the specific interests and positions of the students. The profile of the programme distinguishes itself from others in its commitment to engaged scholarship in an interdisciplinary, interdenominational and interreligious setting. The programme aims not only to prepare students to become engaged and independent researchers, but also trains them in critically reflecting on their own convictions and engaging openly with others sustaining different perspectives and positions. The research master programme offers nine different tracks, some of which are theologically oriented and some of which have a religious studies orientation. The point gravity at this moment lies in the study of the Christian tradition (such as church history, theology, biblical studies), but the tracks also include Islamic and Buddhist perspectives.

The curriculum takes the students' individual study paths as a starting point. Next to the required course, students map out their study trajectories through specialization courses, electives and research internships. 30 EC is reserved for the thesis project. The students partake in the research environment provided by the Graduate School and Faculty through participation in meetings, consultations and seminars of the different research groups and overarching research community.

The programme has taken several measures to meet the recommendations of the previous assessment panel (2015), including a renewed reflection on the profile and the reformulation of the first exit qualification; an increased effort to support students in orienting themselves towards careers outside academia; a strengthening of advanced academic skills (writing a PhD-proposal, for example); an improved thesis matrix; a clearer differentiation of research master level; a stronger focus on completion rates; a further development of the vision on internationalisation; the improvement of the connection between students and researchers at the faculty; and finally, an increased attention to the level of English in the theses. These measures will be addressed in more detail in the respective chapters.

The Assessment

The Faculty of Religion and Theology of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam assigned AeQui to perform a quality assessment of its Research Master Programme in Theology and Religious Studies as part of the assessment of the cluster Research Master Programmes in Theology & Religious Studies, which also includes research master programmes in Theology & Religious Studies at the University of Amsterdam and the University of Groningen. AeQui composed an independent and competent assessment panel, in close cooperation with the programme management of the three programmes of the cluster. The panel members are all experts in the field of Theology and/or Religious Studies and have the necessary expertise and experience to assess the research master programmes thoroughly and in a knowledgeable manner. The panel has carried out its assessment in relation to, and in consideration of, the cluster of programmes in which this programme is placed. The contextualisation of the programme within its cluster was conducted by the complete panel during the preliminary meeting and the final deliberations. All panel members have the

necessary expertise to form a substantiated judgment on the position of the programme within its cluster.

In the spring of 2020, a preparatory meeting with representatives of the programme took place to exchange information and plan the date and programme of the site-visit. Originally, the site visit was to take place on 29 June 2020. However, due to the governmental restrictions in the context of COVID19, the assessment of the cluster was postponed to the fall and executed completely by digital means. In the case of the programme of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the online site visit took place on 6 November 2020 via Zoom. For an overview of the site visit programme, see attachment 2.

In the run-up to the site visit, the panel studied the self-evaluation report of the programme and its supporting documents, and also reviewed a sample of student work, a total of fifteen theses and two research internship reports. The findings formed the basis and input for discussions during the site visit. The panel assessed the programme in an independent manner; at the end of the visit, the chair of the panel presented its initial findings to representatives of the programme and institution.

This document reflects the panel's findings, considerations and conclusions according to the NVAO framework for limited programme assessment (2018). It also takes into consideration the specification of additional criteria for research master programmes formulated by the NVAO (2016). A draft version of the report was sent to the programme management; its reactions have contributed to this final version of the report.

A development dialogue with the panel, initiated by the programme, was held in November 2020. The results of this development dialogue have had no influence on the assessment presented in this report.

1. Intended learning outcomes

Based on the interviews and examination of the underlying documentation, the assessment panel concludes that the programme **meets** the criteria for this standard. According to the panel, the programme's profile and objectives are aligned with (inter)national expectations for a research master in the domains of Theology and Religious Studies. The programme has a unique profile in the Netherlands, given the manner in which it incorporates theological, denominational and social perspectives on theology and religion, and the way it highlights the hermeneutics of interreligious dialogue. This combination of perspectives is very innovative and can be seen as an example for other universities in Europe and beyond. The panel appreciates the direction in which the programme is developing and encourages it to continue on this path, broadening its scope of perspectives, both confessional and non-confessional, Western and non-Western. The programme's exit qualifications are concrete, relevant, up-to-date and of the required level for a research master programme, and also reflect the ambitions of the programme.

Findings

The programme objective is described in the Teaching and Examination Regulations: "Students who have completed a Research Master's programme in Theology and Religious Studies have the ability to participate in the academic scholarly discussion in Theology and Religious Studies and to contribute creatively and independently to this field of inquiry. The pragmatic purpose of the Research Master's is to provide students with the necessary knowledge, skills and insights to enable them to enter a PhD programme or to hold positions that require strong academic research skills and experience."

The programme has a unique profile in the Netherlands in that it combines both theological and religious studies perspectives in its curriculum. Students must learn to reflect critically on their own positions and convictions and engage openly with others sustaining different perspectives and positions. In its conversations with management, staff, students and alumni, the panel took some time to fully understand the nature of the programme's profile and what it indeed aims to achieve with regard to emphasis on the hermeneutics and interreligious dialogue and how this approach ties in with the academic level of the research. According to the panel, the programme is best compared to master programmes abroad, such as Harvard Divinity School and the Catholic

University of Notre Dame, both of which value the diversity of religious backgrounds and commitments in the study of religion and theology. The panel commends the programme for taking the recommendations of the previous evaluation to heart and compliments the progress it has made in reformulating its profile in order to highlight how it combines multifarious religious and non-religious perspectives in a research-oriented curriculum.

Students design their own study trajectory on the basis of the specializations on offer. The programme has designed nine tracks with a logical build-up:

1. Building Interreligious Relations:
2. Peace, Trauma and Religion
3. Biblical Studies and Digital Humanities (together with the Faculty of Humanities)
4. New Testament and Early Christianity (together with the Amsterdam Centre for Ancient Studies and Archaeology of VU and UvA)
5. Bible Translation (together with the Faculty of Humanities)
6. Church History: Religious Migration
7. Reformed and Evangelical Theology in Contemporary Society
8. Buddhism in the West
9. Islam in the West.

The programme has translated its goals into 8 exit qualifications which are aligned with the Dublin Descriptors and the Domain Specific Frame of Reference for Theology and Religious Studies. The student:

1. has an in-depth knowledge of the hermeneutical character of research in Theology and Religious Studies and is able to reflect on the implications of this for developing multi- and interdisciplinary approaches to research questions in the field;
2. has an excellent knowledge of one, or a thorough knowledge of more research specializations within the field of Theology and Religious Studies;
3. understands the Faculty's research structure and has actively taken part in one or several of the Faculty's research projects;
4. is skilled in finding, integrating and critiquing relevant professional literature on a research subject or other subject in the field of Theology and Religious Studies;
5. has the skills to independently detect, formulate, analyse and propose solutions to research problems in the field of Theology and Religious Studies. The student is also able to formulate targeted research questions and present these in a plan for a scholarly research project covering a broader scope (such as a PhD research plan);
6. is proficient in conducting research in the field of Theology and Religious Studies and reporting on the research in accordance with reporting standards generally accepted in the field;
7. is able to apply the theoretical views in his or her own field to a range of academic disciplines and contexts, for discussion and other purposes;
8. is eligible for admission to a PhD programme or to hold an academic position requiring research strengths and competencies.

In order to further specify its profile and highlight the hermeneutical and contextual nature of its research, the programme has reformulated the first exit qualification, which will be applied from september 2020 onwards; the student:

“has a thorough understanding of the hermeneutical and contextual character of research in Theology and Religious Studies and is therefore able to approach research questions in this field in a dialogical way, for instance, taking into account the tension between confessional, theological, and religious studies perspectives, comparing perspectives from various religions, world views and cultures, doing justice to texts and practices from other times and places, or using inter- and multidisciplinary approaches.”

The panel concludes that this indeed is a more precise and elaborate formulation of what is expected of the students in this respect.

Considerations

Based on the documentation and the discussions with the representatives of the programme the panel concludes that the programme's profile and objectives meet the requirements in the international academic field of Theology and Religious Studies. The panel states that its profile is unique in the Netherlands and innovative in its combination of theological, confessional and social perspectives on theology and religion and can be seen as an example for other universities in Europe and beyond. The panel is positive about the nine tracks offered by the curriculum, which match the expertise and research foci of the teaching faculty. The exit qualifications are concrete, relevant and of the required research master level. The panel observes that the programme's goal to prepare its students for a PhD programme or academic research in other professional domains is clear from its objectives and exit qualifications. It also concludes that its exit qualifications reflect the aim to support students in developing the necessary skills to critically position

themselves within the academic field and religious and/or confessional landscape, and to engage in an open, dialogical manner with those who uphold different confessional and non-confessional perspectives. The panel commends the programme for the way it is exploring new directions, collectively reflecting on its profile and translating its choices into clearer exit qualifications accordingly. The panel urges the programme to continue in its endeavours to make explicit what it stands for and to reflect critically

on how it might include more non-Western perspectives in its curriculum. It observes that the programme is successful in attracting the students who match its current profile: they come from different faiths and denominations from within the Netherlands as well as from abroad.

In conclusion, based on the documentation and the interviews, the panel judges that the programme indeed **meets** the criteria formulated for standard 1.

2. Teaching-learning environment

Based on the interviews and examination of the underlying documentation, the assessment panel concludes that the programme **meets** the criteria for this standard. The panel is positive about the orientation, contents and teaching philosophy of the programme, and appreciates the tracks offered within the curriculum, which are aligned with the research expertise of staff members. The panel is very impressed with the innovative programme of the VU, with many topics that are relevant and urgent. The programme has been carefully designed and has matured into something that is attractive for international students. According to the panel, the programme offers its students a challenging, inspiring curriculum, which is very flexible and highly student-centred. The panel appreciates the freedom students have to design their own study trajectory by way of specialization courses, electives, classics courses and an internship. There is a clear research orientation throughout the whole of the curriculum. The panel urges the programme to find ways of ensuring the research master level without raising the study load for research master students following courses in the one-year master. The panel states that students receive the necessary guidance and support for their studies, but also observes that the curriculum is complex and that there are not many courses exclusive to the research master itself. It recommends that the programme investigate how it might further develop its system of guidance and how it might include more educational units that are specific to the research master. The panel characterizes the teaching staff as dedicated and highly qualified researchers and educators, many of whom are leaders in their field of inquiry. Students are highly appreciative of the curriculum and their teachers and feel themselves to be very much part of a stimulating, but also safe, learning environment and research community. The programme is selective in admitting students and has a clear intake-procedure that ensures that the level and qualifications of incoming students are aligned with the content and goals of the programme.

Findings

Content

The Research Master in Theology and Religious Studies is a two-year, full-time and part-time programme, consisting of 120 EC. The curriculum is composed of the following modules:

- 30 EC for research master courses (Hermeneutics, research skills courses and research design courses)
- 24 EC for specialization courses
- 24 EC for electives and classics courses
- 12 EC for internships
- 30 EC for the thesis project

The two years are divided into a total of 12 terms which are structured in such a way that students combine research master courses and specialization courses with electives/classics courses, an internship and thesis trajectory. The students following the programme in part-time complete the

programme over a period of four years. The design of the programme ensures that students acquire the necessary knowledge and skills formulated in the exit qualifications in a structured and methodological manner; the level and complexity of module content increases as the student progresses through the programme, and the degree of independence and self-guidance required of the student intensifies.

Upon entering the programme, students must draw up a study plan in which they outline their specialization subject, accompanied by a proposal for the study trajectory they wish to follow in the two years (or four, if studied in part-time) of the research master programme. They must indicate which specialization courses they will be following to achieve their goals. This includes educational units that they aim to do abroad, as well as the course(s) they may follow via the National

Research School for Theology and Religious Studies (NOSTER)]. The study plan is drawn up in consultation with the Research Master Coordinator, and approved by the Examination Board if courses outside the Faculty are included.

Courses specific to the Research Master

The courses designed specifically for the research master students – the *Master Seminar Research Skills* (from september 2021 onwards: *Academic Writing*) and two *Research Design* courses – are aimed at enhancing the students' communication and dialogue skills as well as their research competencies. In the *Hermeneutics* (6 EC) course, students are introduced to the theory and practice of communicating with those who subscribe to different worldviews and traditions of belief. The interreligious or interdenominational dialogue starts in working groups at the end of the *Hermeneutics* course. It forms the basis for mutual understanding and cooperation in the programme, since students from different religions, denominations, and subdisciplines are required to study together and collaborate in projects. The programme strongly believes that students will become better scholars if they are aware from which position they speak.

In the *Research Skills* course (6 EC), students are required to write an academic article for a (peer-reviewed) journal or volume. The course makes use of peer-review: the students read different versions of each other's texts and discuss their progress in class. They must learn to master the full spectrum of academic skills, from punctuation to academic argumentation and formal logics. The *Master Seminar* (6 EC), which takes place throughout the whole first year of the programme, prepares students to deliver a paper at an international conference. Students develop a proposal, write their paper, prepare to present it, improve presentation skills. Again, the course makes use of peer learning to support students' progress. Students are encouraged to actually send in a proposal and attend an actual (inter)national conference. Students from the other master

programmes are welcome to partake in the seminar but are in that case required to meet the research master level.

In preparation for their thesis project students are also required to follow *Research Design* courses 1 and 2 (both 6 EC). In these courses, they deepen their methodological skills and further hone their academic skills (punctuation, bibliographic research, argumentation, writing a 'state of research'). They also receive guidance for writing their thesis proposal and PhD proposal.

Internship

In the internship students demonstrate that they have achieved a portion of the exit qualifications of the programme. The internships have been developed in response to the recommendations of the previous programme evaluation and specifically designed to allow for more tailor-made forms of research training in specific disciplinary and interdisciplinary settings. Since 2014, Students follow an internship (12 EC) in the second semester of the first year or the first semester of the second year. Students are supervised by a mentor, often a researcher/teacher from the Faculty, or, in some cases, an external mentor from a relevant public organization or a specialist in a particular field of inquiry. Students receive guidance from their mentor on a weekly basis and also receive guidance from the internship supervisor – in most cases the Programme Coordinator. To complete this study unit, students must write an internship report, part of which may also be a paper, article, lecture, database, or another research-related product. The panel is very positive about the inclusion of the internship in the programme, since it contributes to the development of research skills specific to the specializations chosen by students, and also allows students to gain experience in research outside academia if this supports their study goals. The students and alumni with whom the panel spoke, all indicated that the internship was very valuable in acquiring the necessary research skills and knowledge to complete their studies. The panel did note, how-

ever, that it was not always clear what the research internship should consist of, given the many different forms it could take on and the many different outcomes produced. For example, 'internships' seemed sometimes to take on the form of a tutorial or an elective.

Thesis Project

To complete the programme, the students must conduct research for their thesis project and report on their findings in a thesis report. The thesis is supervised by a senior staff member of the Faculty who is a specialist in the student's chosen research field. In the thesis, students must demonstrate that (s)he can conduct academic research independently and is qualified for an academic career. The research and thesis must contribute to the academic field of inquiry. The programme makes use of thesis guidelines and a thesis matrix for the assessment (see also chapters 3 and 4).

Specialization, electives and classics courses

The four specialization modules (a total of 24 EC) provide a large part of the theoretical subject content of the nine tracks mentioned before. Students are also allowed to compose a unique study trajectory and make their own combinations (also including modules from outside the Faculty or the VU), as long as the study units have a clear research orientation and form a coherent whole.

The electives (total of 12 EC) and classics courses (total of 12 EC) allow students to broaden and/or deepen their research interests. First, the student must choose two electives. (S)he can choose from the research master modules as well as from the modules of the one-year master programme, such as a course from Spiritual Care, Media, Exploring Baptist Theology, or Philosophy & Theology. The student must also follow two Classics courses, in which a standard work for theology or religious studies is studied. The programme chooses different works each year. These can be about research themes in theology or religious studies, a founding text of one of the world religions, or a novel with a religious theme. This aca-

demically, many students had enrolled in a classics course on *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

The panel has reviewed various courses presented in the context of the site visit and also spoke with students and teachers about the content and goals of the research master courses, the specialization courses, electives, classic courses and internships. Furthermore, it studied an overview in which the relationship between the exit qualifications and the learning objectives per module are made explicit. It can confirm that all exit qualifications are addressed in the curriculum and that the level, complexity and student independence is in accordance with what is expected from a research master.

The panel observes that only a relatively small proportion of the modules are specific to the research master programme (a total of 30 EC, not including internship and thesis) and that other modules (most specialization modules, electives and classics) are followed together with students of the one-year master programmes. The programme has made sure to distinguish the research master level from the 'regular' master level by requiring students to conduct extra, or more complex, assignments in order to receive a pass for a module. Though the panel appreciates that these measures were further developed in response to the previous programme-evaluation, it points out that requiring students to do extra work (in some of the modules of the one-year master programme, not all) is potentially problematic. Not only because the study load allotted to the student is higher than the EC-system prescribes, but also because it might create a division between the students of the one-year master and research master students. In its conversations with students and staff, the panel learned that the current system does seem to function well enough, and that students feel that the extra work gives them the opportunity to investigate a topic in more depth. Nevertheless, the panel suggests that the programme investigate how it might guarantee the research master level in the modules of the one-year master without increasing

the study load. This could be achieved, for example, by intensifying the research orientation of the assignments of the research master students or by assessing the assignments submitted by the research master students differently, for instance by focusing more on the theoretical or methodological aspects of their work. The panel understood that this approach is indeed already applied in some of the modules.

Orientation

Research orientation in the programme

The programme has an advanced and international research orientation, in line with the additional criteria formulated by the NVAO (2016). The difference between the one-year master and the three-year research master programmes is reflected in content and design, as well as in outcomes. The teaching of generic and specialized research-skills is integral to the programme. The panel observes that students acquire the necessary generic research skills, as well as the required specialist knowledge and experience in research methodologies for the execution of their thesis project. In its conversations with staff and students the panel learned that the knowledge and application of advanced research methodologies are primarily acquired via the specialization modules, the electives, the internships and the research design courses. This approach proves to be successful, given the fact that most students have no problem in mastering the appropriate methods and approaches for the study of the subject of their choice.

International orientation

The international orientation of the programme is reflected in several ways. The student body is itself very international, with students coming from many different parts of the world. Furthermore, students are included in the activities of the Faculty departments and research groups, which have a strong international orientation through the international backgrounds and networks of the staff members, as well as the international scope of the disciplines. Furthermore, students

are encouraged to study abroad for their internship or thesis trajectory and visit countries that are relevant to their study subjects (as in the case of the Peace-Trauma-Religion track, for example). For the programme, the international orientation aligns naturally with its focus on interreligious dialogue and the cultivation of an open attitude towards those who have different backgrounds and convictions.

The programme has also, in response to the recommendations of the previous programme evaluation, taken measures to prepare students more for research-oriented careers outside academia. It offers students the opportunity to follow internships outside academia and is in the process of improving the relation between alumni and research master students through collaboration with the alumni relations officer. Some of the tracks (Peace-Trauma-Religion, Building Interreligious Relations, and Biblical Studies & Digital Humanities) also prepare students for professional careers outside academia.

Research environment

The Faculty of Religion and Theology and the Graduate School provide the research environment for the research master students of the programme. In the past years, the programme has improved the connection between students and the researchers and research groups in the Faculty by stimulating them to participate in events and meetings of the research groups and through mentoring role of staff members in the internships. Students feel that the lines between them and staff members are short, that they are supported in navigating the research structure of the Faculty and finding the expertise and experience they need to become independent researchers. Students are also encouraged to follow courses at the national research school NOSTER, which gives them the opportunity to engage with peers and specialists and stay up-to-date with current developments in their field of interest.

Structure

The programme's didactic philosophy is strongly connected with the Faculty's vision on education and its focus on student-centred teaching. The research master programme can be described as highly activating, research-based and thoroughly student-centred, taking the students' own positions and interests as a starting point. The study programme is not only very flexible and tailored to the needs of the individual students, but also very activating in that it incorporates many interactive learning modes and demands that students take responsibility for their own learning process. As became clear from the discussions during the site visit, students indeed feel that their own perspectives and positions are taken seriously, that they are guided in developing an open and critical dialogue with their fellow students and feel themselves to be part of the research community of the Faculty. Importantly, international students indicate that they feel very welcomed by the learning community of the programme.

Incoming students

The programme has a clear and selective admissions procedure to ensure that incoming students match, and are aware of, the requirements of the programme. The admission criteria are described in the programme's Teaching and Examination Regulations. Students must submit a letter of motivation and a preliminary study plan. In most cases, the programme conducts an interview with the student before enrolling in the programme and discusses mutual expectations by email. There is no selection in these contacts, the selection is done on the basis of the gradings in the earlier bachelor or master programme.

Students enrolling in the research master programme must have a Bachelor's degree in Religious Studies, Theology or a closely related area. They must also have sufficient knowledge, insight and skills in the disciplines relevant to the programme. Students must also have an average study result of 7,5 or higher in the post-propaedeutic phase of their previous studies. Finally, students need to provide proof of a sufficient level of proficiency in English.

The Admissions Board determines whether candidates meet the admission requirements. Students starting in the one-year master programme can transfer to the research master programme if they have acquired at least 24 EC for courses with the appropriate level with an average grade of an 8,0 or higher.

The programme is successful in attracting students who match its profile, as is clear from the diverse and international student body.

The panel could also confirm that students indeed must meet the strict selection criteria in order to enrol.

Staff

The research master programme is taught by staff members of the Faculty of Religion and Theology. The teaching team is diverse in terms of gender, nationality, discipline and area of specialization. All members of academic staff who fulfil teaching duties have a PhD as well as a University Teaching Qualification, and most have a teaching and research appointment. The Programme Director has a Senior Education Qualification (SEQ) and has successfully completed an Educational Leadership Course.

Furthermore, teachers follow extra courses to improve teaching skills, such as Mixed Classroom, Blended Learning, and Basic Canvas training. In collaboration with the education centre of the VU (Learn! Academy), the staff has participated in different workshops on testing and assessment, guidance and assessment of papers, designing education and formulating objectives. In staff meetings and informally, teachers regularly discuss how they deal with diversity and differentiation in their student groups, and learn what kinds of activating didactics can be used for this.

The panel is impressed by the quality and dedication of all teachers and staff of the research master. It confirms that the lecturers involved in the programme have a high level of expertise and are fully qualified to teach, support, guide and tutor the students enrolled in the programme.

Language

The programme is taught in English. The choice is based on the international research orientation of the programme, the international scope of the specializations tracks, the international background and networks of many of the staff members, as well as the aim of the programme to also attract international students. Students are encouraged to study abroad, to participate in international conferences, to publish in English and to pursue academic careers.

The programme ensures that its staff members and students meet the language requirements. Staff members must have at least a C2 level in English. The panel noted that the majority of the teachers does not have an English Proficiency Qualification; however, at the time of the site visit, these teachers were in the process of acquiring this qualification. The panel is confident that the English proficiency of the staff is of the expected level and did not encounter any complaints with regard to the language of instruction.

Students' proficiency requirements in English are described in the Teaching and Examination Regulations, with clear criteria for results of English tests (IELTS, TOEFL, Cambridge Advanced English). The programme provides students with contact details for English correctors and encourages them to take courses in English fluency. Based on the above, the panel endorses the choice for English as language of instruction.

Mentoring and guidance

Students enrolling in the programme receive personal guidance from their teachers, internship mentors/supervisors, and thesis supervisors. Day-to-day supervision is provided by the Programme Coordinator during classes, informal meetings and via app-groups. Based on the documentation, the student chapter and the discussions conducted during the site visit, the panel concludes that, overall, the programme succeeds in offering students the necessary supervision, guidance and support to be able to finish the programme successfully. Students seem to be very capable of finding the right mentoring, advice and support in their development as independent academic

researchers. They are also positive about the personal approach of their teachers, mentors and supervisors, and about the support they receive from the Programme Coordinator. However, students do indicate that it would help them if there was more guidance during the first period of the programme, more explanation of the differences between the one-year master and the research master and more opportunities for interacting as a learning community during the whole of the programme, given the very individualized nature of the curriculum. Also, international students indicate that they sometimes need time to get used to the Faculty's style of teaching and communicating. The panel encourages the programme to think of ways of further developing its onboarding and support system for students with these aspects in mind.

Considerations

As can be derived from the above, the panel is very positive about the different aspects of the teaching and learning environment. It is very impressed with the innovative programme of the VU, with many topics that are relevant and urgent. Also innovative is the fact that it combines fields that traditionally do not mix. It is an example for other departments and universities, in Europe and abroad. The programme has been carefully designed and matured into something that is attractive for international students.

The panel has much appreciation for the content and orientation of the way students are challenged and inspired to follow their own research interests, while also taught to openly and critically engage in interreligious dialogue with each other. The programme is fully student-centred, activating and research-oriented and meets the requirements with regard to level, complexity and student independence. The orientation of the curriculum is fully aligned with what is expected from an international research master programme. This is expressed in the content and goals of the various modules, the alignment with the research expertise of the teaching staff, the dynamics of the

international and diverse classroom and the manner in which students partake in the research culture of the Faculty. The panel thinks that the inclusion of more courses exclusive to the research master might benefit the coherence of the research master programme as learning community and also create more clarity with regard to the required level. Also, the panel would like the programme to take a closer look at the extra study-load for research master students following modules in the one-year master to see if a different approach might be preferred.

The panel praises the way the programme has succeeded in creating an inclusive learning environment for its students, fostering trust between all those involved. Students are able to navigate their way through the curriculum and receive the necessary support and guidance to achieve their

goals. The panel encourages the programme to continue to improve its system of guidance, particularly with regard to the first period of the study. The panel is appreciative of the selective admissions procedure and concludes that the programme succeeds in enrolling students who are well matched with the profile of the programme and meet the high demands of a research master programme. The level of staff members is high, they prove themselves to be highly skilled educators and expert researchers, many of whom are leaders in their field of inquiry, and are appreciated as such by the students.

With these considerations in mind, the panel judges that the programme **meets** this standard.

3. Student assessment

Based on the interviews and examination of the underlying documentation, the assessment panel concludes that the programme **meets** the criteria for this standard. The panel has established that the assessments of the programme are valid, objective and transparent due to the use of standard assessment forms, adequate communication with students and the implementation of the four-eyes principle in the design of the assessments and the assessment of the internship and thesis. Assessments and the feedback given to students contribute to the students' development and study progression. The panel encourages the programme to further develop its assessment protocol for the internships in line with the wide range of possible (non-textual) end products. The panel took note of the fact that the thesis can also take on the form of a literature review or an article. It urges the programme to be very clear about the requirements and assessment criteria of the thesis. The panel is positive about the dedication and active involvement of the Examination Board.

Findings

Quality of assessments

The assessment system of the programme is based on the requirements formulated by VU University and set out in the Teaching Examination Regulations (TER). Assessments in the research master programme are aimed at training students to become critical thinkers and researchers. This is reflected in the modes of formative and summative assessment, which consist of written exams with open questions, papers, academic articles, oral presentations, reflection reports, research proposals, internship reports and theses. Assessments are developed following the principle of constructive alignment, whereby the intended learning outcomes, exit qualifications teaching methods and assessments are designed in relation to each other. This coherence is drawn up in an Assessment Plan by the Programme Director. The Assessment Plan describes how different parties (lecturers, examiners, programme management, Education Office, Programme Committee and Examination Board) contribute to the assessment quality of the programme. At least two parties are always involved in each part of the system of testing. The teacher is responsible for the text in the study guide, in which the exit qualifications of the module and the types of tests can also be found, as well as the percentage for which the various tests count for the final

grade of the module. The Programme Director checks the texts, focusing on different aspects each year. Working on the study guide allows the Programme Director to get an overview of the tests, test forms, and exit qualifications before the actual academic year. The teacher is responsible for the design of the assessments. New or renewed tests must be submitted to a fellow lecturer, who provides feedback on the matrix provided. Each module is archived as a digital dossier. Part of this digital dossier is the assessment file, which includes the examination(s); a completed checklist by the peer-reviewer; an answer model with detailed scores (both in the case of open questions and multiple-choice questions); the assessment form for papers; examinations completed by the students. Regular (both formal and informal) module evaluations and reviews by the Programme Committee help to determine whether the assessments are indeed transparent and fair according to students.

The panel reviewed samples of course information (guidelines, materials, assessments, programme) in preparation for the site visit. It concludes that the assessment system for the modules meets the required standard: the course guidelines give clear information about assessment forms, timing, criteria, weighing and feedback. The programme makes good use of the

four-eyes principle for assessments, thus ensuring that assessments are transparent, objective and valid.

Assessment of Internship

Like the thesis, the internship assesses many of the exit qualifications of the programme (1-7). Students are guided in their research internship by an internship supervisor (usually the Programme Coordinator) and the internship mentor, the expert with whom they work on a research topic. After completing the internship report, the internship supervisor reads the report. The mentor fills in the evaluation form and makes a proposal for a grade. This is followed by a discussion between the internship mentor, internship supervisor and student. The internship supervisor then determines the final grade.

In preparation for the site visit, the panel read 2 internship reports. The panel appreciates that the programme makes use of standard internship guidelines and an assessment matrix for internships. It does however observe, based on the documentation and its conversations with students and staff, that the assessment of the internships is harder to evaluate, given the wide variety of forms these can take on. It would like to encourage the programme to further explicate how the various end products of the internship are weighed and assessed.

Assessment of Thesis

The thesis assesses most of the research-oriented learning outcomes of programme (1-2 and 4-8) through which the student demonstrates that (s)he can independently conduct academic research and is prepared for an academic career. The programme has developed guidelines and an assessment matrix for the thesis. The thesis is always assessed by two lecturers, the supervisor of the thesis and a second examiner. These examiners are appointed by the Examination Board. The first supervisor is linked to the thesis throughout the process, whereas the second is only involved in the final examination of the written product. In principle, the final grade is based on an average

of the two grades. However, the two supervisors can negotiate with each other about the final grade. If two supervisors are necessary for an interdisciplinary thesis, a third assessor must be appointed at the end of the trajectory in order to safeguard a grading independent of the supervision of the trajectory itself. Feedback is communicated orally to the students.

In preparation for the site visit, the panel reviewed 15 theses and assessments of the most recent graduates (three cohorts) of the programme. According to the panel, overall, the end level is high and the assessments of the theses are adequate. The panel agrees with almost all the grades given. In the case of one thesis, the panel judged that the quality did not meet the standard expected of a research master programme: it concerned a thesis in the form of an article. The panel also remarked on the fact that the theses can take on different forms: some students present their thesis as an article and one thesis consisted of a literature review. In view of the panel, these findings point towards several aspects that could be improved in the thesis assessment protocol. The panel has no objections to students writing an article as their thesis project, and even applauds this innovative approach. However, writing an article is very different from writing a thesis. If students are allowed to write an article as their thesis, the programme must ensure that this type of thesis meets particular quality standards for it to have the same value as a thesis (which is longer and requires a more extensive report of the conducted research activities). The panel therefore urges the programme to make explicit what it expects students to achieve in their thesis project, what kinds of products count as a thesis and what the specific criteria of assessment are.

Furthermore, the panel appreciates the effort that has been made by the programme to develop a detailed assessment matrix and is quite sure that assessments take place in an objective and reliable manner. But it also observes that it could benefit from some improvements. First of all, the averaging system of the assessment matrix can lead to higher end grades which do not always reflect

the overall research quality of the thesis. The current matrix also does not encourage extensive written feedback from the examiners. Though students receive oral feedback on their thesis, it is also important that the considerations of the examiners can be reviewed by third parties (Examinations Board, external panels, etc). To conclude, the panel would like to encourage the programme to develop an assessment form that allows room for written feedback and with a weighing system that more tailored to the demands of a research master programme.

Examination Board

During the site visit, the panel spoke with members of the Examination Board of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. The Examination Board consists of representatives of the Faculty, including one external member. The board members are appointed by the Faculty board for three years and their appointment can be renewed.

The Examinations Board is responsible for the overall quality of assessments as well as the quality of the final assessment. The Examination Board conducts sample module and thesis inspections to assure the quality of tests and examinations after they have been administered. Points for improvement are communicated with the examiner and/or the Programme Director.

In addition, the Examination Board has an important role in stimulating the quality culture within the ReMa's programme. The Board does so by informing lecturers about different tools for improving the quality and reliability of the assessment system. The Examination Board draws up an annual report on its findings regarding assessment quality and compliance of the ReMa with the Faculty's assessment policy which is submitted to the Faculty Board.

In its conversations with the Examination Board, the panel received a positive impression of the way it fulfils its duties. The panel observes that the board is aware of its responsibilities and takes ac-

tive measures for the improvement of the assessment system. The panel also spoke with the Examinations Board about the assessment protocol, criteria and forms of the internship and thesis. The board recognized the points of concern voiced by the panel. The assessment protocol for the internship has been a work in progress in recent years, but certainly has the attention of the Examination Board. It also acknowledged that the thesis assessment criteria and form would benefit from a stronger alignment with the objectives of the research master programme. The panel is confident that the board will proactively contribute to these improvements.

Considerations

Based on the findings described above, the panel concludes that the programme's assessment system meets the required standards. The programme uses different kinds of assessments in alignment with the learning goals per course unit and ensures that the assessments are transparent, objective and valid through the use of good course information, structural course evaluations and the application of the four-eyes principle at various stages in the assessment system. The assessments also contribute to the study progress of the students. The panel thinks that the assessment criteria and form of the internship and thesis could be further specified, in line with the objectives of the research master programme.

The panel is positive about the way the Examination Board fulfils its role. It takes its responsibilities seriously and is proactive in implementing improvements to the assessment system.

Based on the interviews and examination of the underlying documentation, the panel establishes that the programme **meets** this standard.

4. Achieved learning outcomes

Based on the interviews and examination of the underlying documentation, the assessment panel concludes that the programme **meets** the criteria for this standard. According to the panel, the level of the theses and the academic careers of the students make clear that the programme is able to achieve its intended learning outcomes. Overall, the end level of the programme is high. The theses projects are innovative and address a wide range of relevant subjects. The panel considers the theses to be examples of advanced and independent research, proving that the students are very well prepared for a PhD-position. Many of the graduates continue their careers as PhD-candidates, though, as with other research master programmes in this field, it is less clear what kind of careers graduates are able to pursue if they do not find an academic position. The panel points out that students can benefit from the wide denominational network of the Faculty of Religion and Theology in searching for suitable positions outside academia.

Findings

Thesis

To complete the programme, the students must conduct research for their thesis project and report on their findings in a thesis report. As indicated before, the panel studied 15 theses in preparation for the site visit. Overall, the panel is very impressed by the quality of the theses: they convey good research skills, are based on clear formulations of the research problem, are sufficiently complex and address a wide variety of relevant and contemporary subjects. The panel qualifies the theses as examples of advanced and independent research, proving that the students are certainly be eligible for a PhD-trajectory. In this sense the programme without a doubt lives up to its profile as a research master. As mentioned before, the panel did have some reservations with regard to one thesis, written as an article, which did not seem to meet the required research master level. The panel does not see this thesis as representative for the overall end level of the programme but does think it calls for some measures of improvement with regard to the thesis guidelines, guidance and assessment criteria. These have been described in the previous chapter.

That students achieve the research master level is also reflected in their further careers after gradu-

ation. Of the 21 alumni the programme has contacted, 5 have continued their career as a PhD-candidate. Other alumni have been able to find positions in the fields of education, spiritual care, churches, the media, health care, government, NGOs and the business community. Some alumni have their own companies in the spiritual or advisory field. The alumni the panel spoke to were very positive about how the programme had prepared them as researchers. They also indicated that they benefited from the focus of the programme on hermeneutics and interreligious dialogue, stating that they are able to engage openly and constructively with others who come from different religious backgrounds. The panel is pleased to hear that alumni are very positive about the programme and that a number of graduates do indeed succeed in finding an academic position as a PhD-candidate. However, it also observes that it remains unclear to what extent all graduates are successful in finding appropriate vocations in which they can benefit from their research training. In its discussions with representatives of the programme, the panel did find that the programme is aware of the scarcity of research positions for graduating students. The programme has taken several measures to address this issue, as has been discussed in chapter 2. The panel would like to encourage the programme to continue to think about ways of highlighting the transferability of research skills and preparing students for vocations in the public and

private domain, and to make use of its extensive denominational and societal partners and networks to achieve this. The panel appreciates the active involvement of the alumni officer in preparing students for other careers, which indeed shows that the programme has taken measures to improve the prospects of its graduates.

Considerations

Based on its findings the panel judges that the students in the programme indeed achieve the intended learning outcomes. Overall, the end level is high, given the innovative quality of the theses and the manner in which students are prepared for a career as an academic. The panel

urges the programme to further develop and make explicit its expectations with regard to the thesis trajectory. It also encourages the programme to continue to think of ways of preparing students for other careers in which advanced and/or transferable research skills are required, and to make use of its extensive denominational networks and partnerships in the public domain.

Based on the interviews and examination of the underlying documentation, the assessment panel establishes that the programme **meets** this standard.

Attachments

Attachment 1 Assessment Panel

Prof. dr. A.F. (Ab) de Jong	Ab de Jong is professor of Comparative Religion and Religions of Antiquity – Leiden University Centre for the Study of Religion. He is board member of NOSTER, The Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion, and KNAW member.
Prof. dr. M. (Mark) Sedgwick	Mark Sedgwick is Professor of Arab and Islamic Studies, Department of Culture and Society, Aarhus University Denmark.
Prof. dr. M. (Maïke) Schult	Maïke Schult is Professor Practical Theology at Philipps-Universität Marburg and lecturer for practical theology in Halle, Hamburg, Kiel, Paderborn, Tübingen.
BA A.L. (Lucy) Spoliar	Lucy Spoliar is a Research Master Student Theology and Religion at University of Groningen.

The panel was supported by Jesseka M. Batteau PhD.

Attachment 2 Programme of the Assessment

6 November 2020

Research Master Theology and Religious Studies VU Amsterdam

(Interviews via Zoom)

09.00 – 17.45 *Internal Deliberation (panel only)*

09.30 – 10.00 *Presentation by Programme*

10.15 – 11.15 *Faculty Board Members and Programme Management*

11.30 – 12.30 *Lecturers*

13.15 – 14.15 *Students*

14.30 – 15.15 *Examination Board*

15.30 – 16.15 *Alumni and Work Field Representatives*

17.45 – 18.00 *Feedback*

Attachment 3 Documents

- Self-evaluation report (SER)
- Teaching and Examination Regulations (2019-2020; 2020-2021)
- Overview curriculum (annual plan 2019-2020; 2020-2021)
- Fact sheet programme
- Overview academic staff and CV's
- Thesis regulations and matrix
- Assessment Plan Programme
- List of output by students
- Literature courses
- Annual reports Examination Board
- Annual reports Programme Committee
- Rules and Regulations Examination Board
- Course information and material:
 - Classics 2
 - Research Design 2
 - Master Seminar
 - From Christ to Constantine
- Theses of 15 students
- Internship reports of 2 students