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**Research Master  
Theology & Religious Studies  
University of Groningen**

*Report of the limited programme assessment  
5 November 2020*

Utrecht, The Netherlands  
February 2021  
[www.AeQui.nl](http://www.AeQui.nl)  
*Assessment Agency for Higher Education*

## Colophon

### Programme

University of Groningen

Research Master

Location: Groningen

Mode of study: fulltime

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. A. Koch, domain expert

B. Jacobs MA, student

Dr. J.M. Batteau, secretary

The panel was presented to the NVAO for approval.

The assessment was conducted under responsibility of

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## Summary

On 5 November 2020, an assessment panel of AeQui visited the research master programme Theology and Religious Studies of the University of Groningen. The two-year full-time programme of 120 ECTS can be characterised as a research-oriented and fully student-centred programme, with a distinctive profile in Religion and Pluralism, Religion, Conflict and Globalisation, Religion Health and Wellbeing and Religion and Cultural Heritage. These foci correspond to notable research strengths of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of University of Groningen and ensure a highly integrated research- and learning environment that clearly benefits students in the programme. 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

According to the panel, the programme's profile and objectives are fully consonant with (inter)national expectations for a research orientated master in the domains of Theology and Religious Studies. The programme has formulated exit qualifications that are concrete, relevant, up-to-date and of the required level for a research master programme. It has succeeded in making a clear distinction between the one-year master and the research master in level, complexity and student independence. The panel praises the robust research environment in which the programme is embedded and the manner in which the four specialisations have been matched with the research strengths of the faculty. The panel judges that the programme **meets** the criteria for this standard.

### Teaching-learning environment

The panel is very positive about the orientation, contents and teaching philosophy of the programme, and appreciates the way the four specialisations are given form in the curriculum. 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 specialisation courses, traineeships, tutorials and electives, and it observes that this can lead to great things. There is a strong research orientation throughout the whole of the curriculum, and an active engagement with current debates. The panel states that students receive the necessary guidance and support for their studies, but also observes that the curriculum relies on the independence and self-direction of students who already have a clear idea

of what they want to achieve. The panel characterizes the teaching staff as outstanding, highly qualified and dedicated researchers and educators, many of whom are leaders in their field of inquiry. Students are highly appreciative of their teachers and feel themselves to be very much part of a safe and cohesive research community. The panel also applauds the programme for paying close attention to mental health issues. 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** the criteria for 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 summative tests and the thesis. Assessments and the feedback given to students contribute to the students' development and study progression. The panel is also positive about the involvement of the Board of Examiners, the members of which fulfil their tasks and responsibilities in a dedicated manner. The panel judges that the programme meets the criteria for 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. The theses are of outstanding quality, address a wide range of relevant subjects and are

the outcome of a complete research cycle. The theses can be qualified as examples of advanced and independent research and prove that the students are clearly very well prepared for a PhD-position. Many of the graduates continue their careers as PhD-candidates. The panel judges that the programme **meets** the criteria for this standard.

### Recommendations

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

- The panel endorses the plans of the programme to strengthen its mentoring system and urges it to also find ways to support students who still need to orient themselves in formulating their goals.
- The panel observed that the curriculum is complex due to the many different individualised study trajectories and urges it to increase the programme's feasibility by streamlining and simplifying procedures in the design and organisation of the students' study trajectories.
- The panel observes that the programme is very successful in attracting bachelor students from

the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of the University of Groningen, but also sees opportunities for growth through an increased enrolment of international students. It recommends that the programme investigate how it can attract more students from abroad.

- The panel encourages the programme to further develop its assessment protocol for the traineeships in line with the wide range of possible (non-textual) end products.
- The panel appreciates the active role of Board of Examiners but also thinks that the board might be too involved in the day-to-day procedures of approval. It recommends that the board develop a less time-consuming system of oversight in monitoring the research master level of the different educational components.
- 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.

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 University of Groningen, which took place on 5 November 2020 as part of the cluster-evaluation of the Research Master Programmes of Theology & Religion. The University of Groningen is one of the largest in the Netherlands, offering its 36.000 students, including around 7.300 first-year bachelor students, more than 5.100 master students and more than 8.500 international students, a wide range of programmes in many different disciplines. It has approximately 5,800 FTE worth of staff, including the University Medical Center Groningen, encompassing over 360 full professors and over 2.000 PhD candidates. The Research Master Theology & Religious Studies programme is a two-year, full-time course which trains students to become skilled academic researchers in the broad, interdisciplinary field of Theology and Religious Studies.

### The Institute

The Research Master Programme Theology and Religious Studies is part of the Graduate School of the independent Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, one of the ten faculties (including the University College) of the University of Groningen. The Graduate School is based at the Centre for Religious Studies (CRS), the Faculty's research institute which coordinates research in the three Faculty departments: Jewish, Christian and Islamic Origins, Comparative Study of Religion and Christianity and the History of Ideas. The Graduate School offers two degree programmes: a PhD programme and the Research Master programme Theology and Religious Studies.

### The Programme

The programme is a two-year, full-time research master course, taught in English, amounting to 120 EC. Following the Faculty's vision on the societal importance of theology and religion, the programme offers a broad scope of possible fields of study and inquiry. This includes a focus on the origins of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and specialisations specific to the Graduate school: Religion and Pluralism, Religion, Conflict and Globalisation, Religion Health and Wellbeing and Religion and Cultural Heritage.

The curriculum takes the students' individual study paths as a starting point, which they can

map out through specialisation courses, tutorials, electives and research traineeships. In the two years (four semesters) students are required to follow 30 EC of core courses, 20 EC in specialisation courses, 10 EC in tutorials, 10 EC in electives and 20 EC in research traineeships. 25 EC is reserved for the thesis project and 5 EC for writing a research proposal. The students partake in the research environment provided by the Graduate School as well as the three departments and Research Institutes of the Faculty of Theology and Religion: the Centre for Religion, Conflict and Globalization, the Centre for Religion, Health and Wellbeing, the Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture in Asia, the Qumran Institute and the Centre for Religion and Cultural Heritage.

The programme was renewed in 2017/2018 and has taken several measures to meet the recommendations of the previous assessment panel (2015):

- the programme has highlighted and made more visible the specialisations available to the students: Religion and Pluralism, Religion, Conflict and Globalization, Religion and Cultural Heritage and Religion, Health and Wellbeing (since 2019/2020);
- to further strengthen its international orientation, the programme has created room in the programme for an international internship or exchange abroad in the third semester

and has invested in the development of sustainable international partnerships;

- the programme pays more attention to the possibilities for research-oriented careers in the public and private sector, by giving students the opportunity to do internships outside of the academic domain.

In response to internal evaluations the programme has also introduced a field specific research skills course (5 EC) as well as a course unit for writing a research proposal (5 EC). It has also reformulated its core curriculum with the aim to make it more foundational and thus relevant for all students in terms in content and skills.

### The Assessment

The Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of the University of Groningen 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 Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. AeQui composed an independent and competent assessment panel, in close co-operation 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 programme in a knowledgeable and thorough 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 28 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 University of Groningen, the online site visit took place on 5 November 2020 via Google Meet. 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 five research proposals. 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 led to this final version of the report.

At the initiative of the programme, a development dialogue was held in January 2021. The results of this development dialogue have 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 fully consonant with (inter)national expectations for a research orientated master in the domains of Theology and Religious Studies. The programme has formulated exit qualifications that are concrete, relevant, up-to-date and of the required level for a research master programme. It has succeeded in making a clear distinction between the one-year master and the research master in level, complexity and student independence. The panel praises the robust research environment in which the programme is embedded and the manner in which the four specialisations have been matched with the research strengths of the faculty.

### Findings

The aim of the Research Master Programme in Theology & Religious Studies of the University of Groningen (RUG) is to train students to become researchers who have the ability to participate in academic scholarly discussions in Theology and Religious Studies at an international level, and to contribute creatively and independently to these fields of inquiry by designing, conducting, and evaluating research. The programme offers four specialisations: Religion and Pluralism, Religion, Health and Wellbeing (since 2019-2020), Religion and Cultural Heritage and Religion Conflict and Globalisation.

Research Master students who complete the programme must be able to formulate their own research project, embed this within the relevant academic literature and debates, carry out research under the guidance of a supervisor, analyse the results and based on this analysis, provide a contribution to their field of research. Furthermore, they have gained insight into the workings of academic life so that by the end of the programme, they are not only able to enter PhD-programmes both in the Netherlands and abroad but also know what this choice entails.

When compared to the other two independent research master programmes in the Netherlands, this programme is most similar to the programme offered at the University of Amsterdam in the way religion is studied within a broad historical and

cultural context. However, content-wise, the programme differs from the one at UvA, having different focal points and specialisations.

The research master programme has translated its objectives into exit qualifications which are aligned with the Area Specific Frame of Reference of Theology and Religious Studies and the Dublin Descriptors. The programme has made explicit how its objectives these differ from the one-year master with regard to research level, complexity and student independence. Students must meet the following exit qualifications, and must have:

1. a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the main debates and approaches relevant for the fields of Theology and Religious Studies and their history, with a focus on interdisciplinary methodologies and theoretical perspectives;
2. in-depth knowledge of at least one theoretical and methodological approach;
3. the skills to find, examine and critique specialized literature on a subject in at least one subfield of Theology and Religious Studies and become acquainted with the methods applied in this field;
4. the ability to structure and conduct independent research in at least one subfield of Theology and Religious Studies, to apply the appropriate research methods, and to report



on this in accordance with the standards commonly used in this discipline;

5. the ability to follow and analyze complex scientific debates and subsequently determine and defend one's own position;
6. the ability to consider historical, methodological, social and ethical interests within their own discipline when it comes to the academic assessment and analysis of complex issues;
7. the ability to critically reflect on the historical, social and cultural meaning of religious traditions and attitudes in relation to religion;
8. good oral and written presentation skills, which enable them to write research papers for specialist audiences that they present at academic conferences and publish in academic journals. They should also be able to communicate their conclusions to non-specialist audiences via media such as online blogs, popular articles and opinion pieces for newspapers, public lectures and presentations, and policy briefing papers;
9. an academic attitude that demonstrates independence, creativity, critical-reflectiveness, and academic integrity;
10. the ability to embark on a PhD programme or to function in a national or international research environment requiring special research competences and experience.

### Considerations

Based on the documentation and the discussions with the representatives of the programme the panel concludes that the programme's profile and objectives fully meet the requirements in the international academic field of Religious Studies. The panel is positive about the four specialisations that match the expertise and research focal points of the teaching faculty and align with the specialisations in the one-year master track. 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 clearly formulated in its objectives and exit qualifications.

In conclusion, based on the documentation and the interviews, the panel judges that the programme indeed fully **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 very positive about the orientation, contents and teaching philosophy of the programme, and appreciates the way the four specialisations are given form in the curriculum. 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 specialisation courses, traineeships, tutorials and electives, and it observes that this can lead to great things. There is a strong research orientation throughout the whole of the curriculum, and an active engagement with current debates. The panel states that students receive the necessary guidance and support for their studies, but also observes that the curriculum relies on the independence and self-direction of students who already have a clear idea of what they want to achieve. Students who still need to orient themselves, could benefit from more support in formulating their goals. The panel thinks that the feasibility of the individualized study paths could be enhanced by strengthening the mentoring system and streamlining procedures for approval. The panel characterizes the teaching staff as outstanding, highly qualified and dedicated researchers and educators, many of whom are leaders in their field of inquiry. Students are highly appreciative of their teachers and feel themselves to be very much part of a safe and cohesive research community. The panel also applauds the programme for paying close attention to mental health issues. 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. It states that the programme is very successful in retaining its BA-students, but also sees opportunities for growth by attracting more international students who enter the programme directly.

### Findings

#### Content

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

- 30 EC of core courses
- 20 EC of specialisation courses
- 10 EC of tutorials
- 10 EC of electives
- 20 EC of traineeships
- 25 EC Thesis
- 5 EC Research Proposal

The academic year is divided into two semesters. These are structured in such a way that students combine core courses and specialisation courses with traineeships, electives and tutorials, with a build-up in the amount of credits students have to compose their own study trajectory through

specialisation courses, electives and tutorials, culminating in the thesis project and the research proposal. In each of the first two semesters, students follow 15 EC in core courses, in the two final semesters, all courses are geared towards the specific study trajectory of the student.

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.

#### Core courses

The core courses are mandatory for all students in the research master. In the course *Theories of Religion and Culture* (10 EC), students are introduced to the history and current developments within the study of religion as a cultural phenomenon with great social impact. During the writing

of their final paper, students get support from a language instructor from the Groningen Language Centre in writing academic English. In the first semester, students also follow the core course *Field-Specific Research Skills* which is aimed at designing a research proposal and the selection of appropriate research methods. Students also learn more about writing a successful PhD proposal.

In the second semester, students follow the course *Philosophy of Science*, which discusses the fundamentals of the different disciplinary approaches (social sciences, philosophy, history, critical theory) within religious studies. Finally, in the same semester, students follow the course *Generic Research Skills*, aimed at strengthening their research skills (academic English, research ethics and academic integrity, for example) as well as giving information on career perspectives in the academic and professional research domain.

### *Specialisation*

In the programme, students must draw up a study plan in which they outline their specialisation subject, accompanied by a proposal for the study trajectory they wish to follow in the two years of the research master programme. They must indicate which specialisation courses, traineeships, tutorials and electives they will be following to achieve their goals. This includes educational units that they aim to do abroad, usually in the third semester, 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 student's mentor, the study advisor and the Director of the Graduate School and submitted for approval to the Board of Examiners.

Research master students choose courses from one of the specialisations (20 ECTS), linked to the research centres and departmental research programmes of the Faculty: 1. Religion and Pluralism, Ancient and Modern; 2. Religion, Conflict and Globalization; 3. Religion and Cultural Heritage, 4. Religion, Health and Wellbeing. The lectures and seminars of these courses are followed together

with the students doing a one-year MA programme. To ensure a higher level for research master students complete an extra assignment in these courses.

The tutorials take on the form of a literature review and are chosen in consultation with the student's mentor. Students work with a member of the academic staff on a topic of their choice and read a selection of literature. The reading list must form a coherent whole, perhaps subdivided into sub themes. The outcomes of the tutorial are either a paper presenting the 'state of the art' of the subject studied or a paper which aims to answer a specific research question based on literature study.

The aim of the research traineeships is to enable students to become thoroughly acquainted with current issues, specialist literature, research methods and techniques. Before the start of the traineeship, students must draw up a plan in consultation with their mentor. If an external supervisor is involved, he or she will also have to sign the plan as well. Traineeships may include writing a publishable book review article, annotating a bibliography, article or essay, carrying out literature or archive research, carrying out field-research, conducting and transcribing interviews, participating in and giving a paper or poster presentation at a national or international conference, seminar or workshop, participating in a summer school, in ongoing research activities of their supervisor or in a research project of a scholar abroad who is affiliated to the research centres of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. The complete plan must be submitted for approval by the Director of the Graduate School before the start of the traineeship.

### *Thesis project*

To complete the programme, the students must conduct a research-based thesis project and write a research proposal that might serve as the basis for a PhD-project. For their thesis project, students go through the full research cycle: from research design, to carrying out the research (which

may include generating their own data), to analysis and interpretation, writing up and presenting the research in their thesis. The thesis is supervised by a senior staff member who is a specialist in the student's chosen research field. A second assessor, also a staff member with specialist knowledge relevant to the thesis subject, checks the research design and, together with the supervisor, grades the final product.

In the thesis, students must demonstrate their ability to identify and define academic problems, by reflecting their skills in using specialist literature and by situating their subjects within the existing academic discussions of theology and religious studies. Moreover, students must demonstrate their ability to develop effective methods to solve research problems, to put these methods into practice, and to report clearly and adequately on the results of their research.

The panel has reviewed various courses presented in the context of the site visit. It also spoke with students and teachers about the content and goals of the electives, traineeships and tutorials. The panel observes that the core modules are of the required research master level and meet the objectives formulated by the programme. It also concludes that students find the core courses to be a very strong feature of the programme, as became clear from the student chapter in the Self-Evaluation Report and the panel's conversations with students during the site visit. In particular, students appreciate the attention that is paid to their individual research interests in a personalized learning environment.

The panel judges that the balance between mandatory courses and traineeships, tutorials and electives is well thought through and that the majority of the students is quite capable of mapping out their own study trajectories and formulating concrete goals for the two years of their study.

The panel has studied an overview in which the relationship between the exit qualifications, the learning objectives per module and assessment criteria are made explicit, and can confirm that all exit qualifications are addressed in the curriculum

and that there is an appropriate build-up in level, complexity and student independence.

The panel took some time to reflect on the fact that students are required to do extra assignments (without receiving extra credits) if they follow courses from specialisations in the one-year master track. This 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 one-year students and the research master students (as an elite group). 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 electives without increasing the study load. This could be achieved by, for instance, assessing the assignments submitted by the research master students differently (by paying more attention to theoretical and methodological questions).

## **Orientation**

### *Research orientation in the programme*

The programme clearly 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 two-year research master is reflected in content and design, as well as its outcomes.

The teaching of generic and specialized research skills is integral to the programme, both within the core courses as well as in the traineeships, tutorials and electives. The core staff members involved are internationally recognized and the modules in the four specialisations are taught by lecturers who are experts in the relevant fields.

Through the tutorials, students gain in-depth knowledge in the current and relevant issues in their field of enquiry. In the traineeships, students actively acquire the skills in research methods, writing and presenting that are needed to become accomplished researchers. Furthermore,

both in the course units taught and in special events and research seminars, research ethics and academic integrity are addressed in the context of concrete (current or completed) research projects. Finally, the writing of a research proposal in the final semester, based on the template of the NWO-application form for PhD-positions, helps students prepare for an actual research position. Students indicated that they are encouraged to reflect critically on their fields of research, as well as on their academic development and personal growth. The programme provides a level of self-reflexivity that students find helpful in the pursuit of further positions within academia.

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 methodologies are primarily acquired via the traineeships, tutorials and electives. This approach seems to be successful, given the fact that most students have no problem in mastering the appropriate methods and approaches for the study of their subject.

#### *Research environment*

The Faculty of Religion and Religious Studies and its Graduate School provide the research environment for the research master students of the programme. The Faculty consists of three departments, which also function as research groups: the department of Jewish, Christian and Islamic Origins, the department of Comparative Study of Religion, and the department of Christianity and the History of Ideas. In addition, the Faculty has five themed research centres which form important contexts for participation in academic life for the students: the Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture in Asia, the Qumran Institute, the Centre for Religion, Conflict and Globalization, the Centre for Religion and Heritage, and the Centre for Religion, Health and Wellbeing. Students regularly participate in and organize workshops, events, summer schools and seminars at

the national and international level of the thematic centres of the Faculty.

The monthly Graduate School seminars offer students the opportunity to present their own work and interact with a diverse research community of PhD-students, visiting PhD-students and fellow research master students. 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 within their field of interest.

The panel concludes that the students in the research master programme are offered a good research environment through the activities at the Graduate School as well as their active involvement with the research centres and the national research school.

#### **Structure**

The didactic philosophy of the programme can be described as highly activating, research-based and thoroughly student-centred. Guided by personal mentors, students give shape to their own study paths and train to become independent researchers. The study programme is not only very flexible and tailored to the needs of the individual students, but also very activating in that the programme incorporates many interactive learning modes, such as workshops, traineeships, seminars and individual tutoring. Students feel themselves to be part of the research community of the Faculty and international students feel welcome.

The panel fully endorses the didactic approach of the programme, but also points out some areas for improvement with regard to guidance, communication and procedural transparency, aspects that are of essential importance for the successful implementation of programme's didactic philosophy. These remarks will be elaborated on in the section on mentoring and guidance.

#### **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 procedure is described in the programme's Teaching and Examination Regulations and on the website of the programme. Students must submit a portfolio with their CV, a letter of motivation, recommendation letters and a sample of writing. Furthermore, they are required to develop a preliminary study plan for the specialisation phase. The student's motivation and the study plan are discussed during the selection interview. 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, acting on behalf of the Board of Examiners, determines whether candidates meet the admission requirements. Students starting in the one-year master programme can transfer to the research master programme after the first semester if they meet all the admissions criteria. In its conversations with representatives of the programme, the panel learned that most of the research master students have indeed transferred from the one-year master to the two-year research master programme.

The panel compliments the programme for being successful in retaining its bachelor students, but also thinks it should make use of the opportunities for growth and further internationalization by strengthening its focus on the recruitment of international students who enrol directly into the programme.

#### **Staff**

The research master programme is taught by staff members of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. The teaching team involved with the programme is diverse in terms of age, nationality, discipline and area of specialisation. All members of academic staff who fulfil teaching duties have a PhD and, with the exception of the

language lecturers, they are all also active as academic researchers. All academic staff members belong to a certain department as well as to the Faculty's research institute, the Centre for Religious Studies (CRS). In 2019-2020, 80% of all lecturers had gained their UTQ. All new lecturers – with the exception of one – are currently following a UTQ programme. In 2018, one lecturer successfully completed the Senior Teaching Qualification (STQ). The research quality of the academic staff is high in terms of intellectual output, awarding of prizes and participation in international academic networks, associations and research projects. They are also successful in acquiring national and international research grants.

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 very high level of expertise and are fully qualified to teach, support, guide and tutor the students enrolled in the programme. Many of the teachers are world leading in their field of inquiry and are therefore able to introduce student to most current research approaches and insights.

#### **Language and international orientation**

The programme is taught in English. The choice is based on the international research orientation of the programme, the international scope of the specialisations in theology and religion, the international background and networks of many of the staff members, as well as the aim of the programme to also attract international students.

The programme ensures that its staff members and students meet the language requirements: lecturers must have a minimum level of C1 to teach in English. The English language proficiency of all lecturers has been assessed, and some lecturers have followed or are currently following language training courses to improve their English. Students are supported in developing their proficiency in writing academic English through small group tutoring by a teacher of the Groningen Language Centre as part of the *Generic*

*Academic Skills* course. Students often follow tutorials, traineeships or electives abroad, in line with their study plan. They are supported financially by an individual travel grant they can apply for with their traineeship plan for travel abroad. To this end, the third semester has been kept free of any compulsory courses to facilitate students spending time abroad.

### **Mentoring and guidance**

Students enrolling in the programme are matched with a personal mentor who guides them in the design of the study plan and advises them in the choices of tutorials, traineeships and specialisation courses over the two years. The students have one-on-one contact with their mentor and meet regularly to discuss the study progress and other academic issues that may arise.

The tutorials and traineeships also involve supervisors/tutors who guide the student in the execution of his or her research assignment. The procedures and requirements of both course units are described in a written manual and made available, alongside other relevant information, in the Electronic Learning Environment, NESTOR.

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 tutoring, advise and support in their development as independent academic researchers. They are also positive about the personal approach of their teachers, supervisors and tutors. However, based on its conversations with representatives of the programme, the panel observes that there is room for improvement in the mentoring system, an observation that is also made in the Self-Evaluation Report and commented on in the Student Chapter. Mentors are often very busy and do not always have a full overview of the research master curriculum. The programme aims to remedy this by scheduling mentor meetings at least once a month and by developing a short training workshop for mentors, so they know what is expected

and what their role is in the programme. The panel is positive about these plans and thinks this will indeed help create more stability and clarity for the students.

Another point of improvement has to do with the complexity and time-consuming nature of organizing electives, tutorials and traineeships. Students indicated that they spend a lot of time on finding supervision and acquiring approval for these study units. In most cases, students must collect signatures from many different parties, including the mentor, the tutor/supervisor, the director of the Graduate School and the Board of Examiners. They also state that it is not always clear what the difference is between these course units (electives can also be used for individual tutorials, for example). The panel urges the programme to streamline, simplify and perhaps centralise these procedures in order to enhance the feasibility of the study trajectories. Given that the programme is tailor made for students who know what they want, improving mentorship and simplifying procedures might also help students with a different mind-set to find their way.

Finally, the panel would like the programme to consider the suggestion of students to incorporate reflection on personal and professional development learning outcomes in the traineeships. This would align with the programme's goal to prepare students for research positions both within and outside academia and strengthen the focus on transferable skills.

### **Considerations**

As can be derived from the above, the panel is very positive about the different aspects of the teaching and learning environment. The panel has much appreciation for the content and orientation of the four specialisations and way students are challenged and inspired to follow their own research interests. The programme is fully student-centred, activating and research-oriented and has a good build-up in 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 of

the core and elective modules, the tutorials, traineeships and the thesis project, as well as in the dynamics of the international classroom. The panel suggests that the programme investigate how it might guarantee the research master level in the electives without increasing the study load for research master students.

Students are actively included in the international research environment of the Faculty and the research centres. The panel praises the way the programme has succeeded in creating a close-knit, inclusive learning environment for its students fostering trust between all those involved. It also applauds the attention for mental well-being at the Graduate School. Students are able to navigate their way through curriculum and receive the necessary support and guidance to achieve their goals. The panel underwrites the measures proposed by the programme to improve the mentoring system and encourages it to

simplify and streamline procedures for approval. The panel is appreciative of the selective admissions procedure and concludes that the programme succeeds in enrolling students that meet the high demands of a research master programme, most of whom have transferred from the one-year master. The panel sees opportunities for further growth through the recruitment of international students. The panel would like the programme to take a closer look at the extra study-load for research master students following electives to see if a different approach might be preferred. The level of staff members is high, they prove themselves to be highly skilled educators and expert researchers 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 summative tests and the 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 traineeships in line with the wide range of possible (non-textual) end products. The panel is also positive about the involvement of the Board of Examiners, the members of which fulfil their tasks and responsibilities in a dedicated manner. It encourages the board to develop a system of oversight in monitoring the research master level of the different educational components.

#### Findings

##### *Quality of assessments*

The assessment system of the programme is based on the requirements formulated by Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. The Faculty has drawn up several documents setting out the regulations with regard to testing and assessment: a Teaching Examination Regulation (TER), an Assessment Plan, an Assessment Policy document, forms for traineeships and tutorials and an assessment form for papers, theses and research proposals. The Director of Education is responsible for drawing up the assessment plan, including the assessment programme. The Director of the Graduate School is responsible for drawing up the programme specific test matrix of learning outcomes and course units.

Assessment in the research master programme is focused on students developing the capabilities and skills necessary to become critical thinkers and researchers. This is reflected in the modes of formative and summative assessment, which consist of papers, research proposals, research reports, essays and literature reviews. In comparison with assessments in the one-year master, the assessments of the research master programme focus more strongly on critical thinking, positioning and arguments, and students are expected to be more independent and self-directing.

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. Lecturers are responsible for the design and execution of assessment of their own course units and for submitting the necessary documents to the Student Administration Office. The programme makes use of peer review when constructing summative assessments. Regular (both formal and informal) module evaluations help to determine whether the assessments were indeed transparent to the students.

As described in the previous chapter, traineeships and tutorials are drawn up in consultation with a mentor and the person supervising the traineeship/tutorial. They must be part of a coherent study programme designed to achieve the intended learning outcomes of the programme. For each traineeship and tutorial, students outline learning outcomes, activities/readings and products to be assessed. Students are assessed and graded by the staff member who supervises them, sometimes in consultation with an external supervisor (for example, when students do a traineeship or tutorial with research projects or scholars outside the faculty).

The assessment of a traineeship takes place on the basis of a self-evaluation with a report of the activities and how these have contributed to the

learning outcomes formulated at the start of the traineeship, as well as other end products. The self-evaluation report represents 20% of the final grade. Tutorials are graded based on intermediary assignments and a final paper discussing the reviewed literature. The programme has specific forms for grading papers linked to traineeships and tutorials at research master level. The documentation concerning the tutorials and traineeships is filed in a personal folder managed by each student in the Nestor environment. Before students can request their diploma, the Board of Examiners checks the whole study programme for coherence and alignment with the learning outcomes.

The panel reviewed various policy documents regarding assessments as well as the programme's test matrix and samples of course information (guidelines, materials, assessments, programme) in the ELE in preparation for the site visit. It concludes that overall, the assessment system meets the required standard, and ensures that assessments are transparent, objective and valid. The course guidelines give clear information about assessment forms, timing, criteria, weighing and feedback. The panel does however observe that the assessment of the traineeships is harder to evaluate, given the wide variety of forms these can take on. Though the programme has developed guidelines for the traineeships, it remained unclear to the panel how the end product (aside from the self-evaluation report) is weighed and assessed, and how the research master level of different end products is indeed incorporated into the assessment criteria for the traineeship.

#### *Board of Examiners*

During the site visit, the panel spoke with members of the Board of Examiners of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. The Board of Examiners consists of an odd number of representatives of the Faculty, including one external member with specific expertise in the field of assessment, and an administrative secretary. The study advisor is appointed to the Board of Examiners in an advisory capacity.

The board determines the rules and guidelines relating to the administering of assessments and examinations and appoints examiners. It is responsible for the overall quality of assessments as well as the quality of the final assessment which establishes whether a student has indeed fulfilled the learning outcomes of the programme. To assure the quality of tests and examinations after they have been administered, the Board of Examiners conducts annual test inspections and thesis inspections, partly on the basis of the assessment dossiers that are compiled by the course unit coordinators and lecturers of all course units. The board reports its findings to the Graduate School Director, the Director of Education and the Faculty Board. If the Board of Examiners has any doubts about the quality of the assessment of a course unit or thesis, it will discuss these with the relevant lecturers and subsequently report to the Director of Education who will, if necessary, speak to the lecturers and make agreements with them. If an assessment for a certain course unit is revised, the Board of Examiners inspects the course unit again the following year. In addition, the board discusses its findings with the lecturers during staff meetings and gives advice to lecturers in response to the test and thesis inspections. Furthermore, the Board of Examiners is involved in the approval of the study plan of students, which is drawn up at the beginning of the study programme. The Board of Examiners checks the study plan for consistency in terms of the specialisation, level (when courses are followed abroad for example) and the amount of ECTS that is spent on the various parts of the program. In addition, when students want to change their study plan (for example they choose different electives than they had planned originally), they have to request approval for these changes via the Board of Examiners.

In its conversations with the Board of Examiners, the panel received a positive impression of the way it fulfils its duties. The panel observes that the board takes its responsibilities very seriously and that many procedures have been standardized and put into writing, which is conducive to the

transparency, validity and objectivity of the assessment system. The panel does think that the board might be too thoroughly engaged with review of assessments on a day-to-day basis, given that all study plans and changes to study plans must be approved by the board. The panel would like to encourage the board to develop a less intensive and more efficient system of oversight in which they are able keep an overview of the quality of assessments. This could be achieved by investing in the development of sound protocols and standard procedures, supported by sample reviews at regular intervals. The panel also proposes that the Board review the assessment protocol of the traineeships with the diversity of end products and the required research master level in mind.

#### *Assessment Thesis and Research Proposal*

All programmes of the Faculty are subject to a set of thesis regulations formulated in the Faculty Assessment Plan. The thesis assesses most of the research-oriented learning outcomes of programme, in particular the learning outcomes related to the application of knowledge and understanding, forming judgements, communication and learning skills. The programme has student guidelines for the assessment of the thesis and an assessment protocol. Examiners use the assessment form provided specifically for assessing research master theses.

The thesis is always assessed by two (or, if necessary, three) lecturers, the supervisor of the thesis programme and a second examiner. These examiners are appointed by the Board of Examiners. The first supervisor is linked to the thesis throughout the process, whereas the second (and sometimes third) examiner(s) are only involved at the design stage and in the final examination of the written product.

Next to the thesis, all students are required to write a research proposal (5 ECTS) for a PhD project. The research proposal should enable the student to meet the application requirements of a PhD position. The format of the research proposal is based on the NWO format (for PhD-positions

in the Humanities). The research proposal is assessed by the supervisor and the lecturer of the course *Writing a Research Proposal*, on the basis of a specific assessment form. By writing a proposal, students are offered the opportunity to be fully prepared for a possible PhD-trajectory.

In preparation for the site visit, the panel reviewed 15 theses and assessments of the most recent graduates (three cohorts) of the programme. It also reviewed 5 research proposals of the most recent cohort. According to the panel, the programme makes use of very structured and constructive assessment forms and observes that the assessments of the theses and research proposals are clear, objective and give sufficient written feedback to the student. The panel agrees with the grades given. Assessments seem fair and transparent; it is clear why a student receives the grade in question. Students show themselves to be very satisfied with feedback they receive and indicate that the assessments indeed help them in their academic development and support their progress in the study programme.

#### **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 assessment criteria are indeed aligned with the research master level. The transparency, objectivity and validity of the assessments are ensured through the use of good course information, clear guidelines/protocols for assessments, constructive assessment forms, structural course evaluations and the application of the four-eyes principle in assessment design and assessment of the thesis. The assessments also contribute to the study progress of the students.

The panel approves of the assessment protocol for the theses and research proposals, and confirms that the grades of the theses it reviewed are indeed a good reflection of the content and level of these end products.

The panel is positive about the way the Board of Examiners fulfils its role. It is clearly dedicated to its tasks and takes these seriously. The panel encourages the Board to closely review the assessment procedure of the traineeships in view of the variety and research master level of the possible end products. Finally, the panel thinks that the Board could be less involved in the day-to-day approval of (the revision of) study plans and

should instead develop a system of oversight through which it can monitor the quality of assessments in a more generic manner.

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. The theses are of outstanding quality, address a wide range of relevant subjects and are the outcome of a complete research cycle. The theses can be qualified as examples of advanced and independent research and prove that the students are clearly very well prepared for a PhD-position. Many of the graduates continue their careers as PhD-candidates. However, as with other research master programmes in this field, it is less clear to the panel what kind of careers graduates are able to pursue if they do not find an academic position. It urges the programme to continue to think of ways of preparing students for research careers outside academia.

### Findings

As indicated, the panel studied fifteen theses and their assessments, as well as five research proposals and their assessments, in preparation for the site visit. The panel is very impressed by the outstanding quality of the theses: they convey excellent research skills, are based on good formulations of the research problem, are sufficiently complex and address a wide variety of relevant and contemporary subjects. All research projects execute the full research cycle. The panel qualifies the theses as examples of advanced and independent research, proving that the students are clearly very well prepared for a PhD-position. Panel members indicated that these students would certainly be eligible for a PhD-trajectory. In this sense the programme without a doubt lives up to its profile as a research master.

That students achieve the research master level is also reflected in the recognition they receive. In several cases, the research conducted for a thesis led directly to designing a research project for a PhD position, which led to a successful application for funding. Furthermore, the research conducted during traineeships has often led students to publish articles in (international) peer-reviewed journals, policy reports and other media. Students have also received awards for their theses. Eight out of sixteen alumni have continued their career as a PhD-candidate in their field of inquiry and

several alumni hold influential positions (in public service or as policy advisor) in which research plays an important role.

Though a relative high number of students is able to find a position as a PhD-candidate after graduation, a substantial number of students does not succeed in finding a suitable academic position. The panel spoke to three alumni with impressive careers outside academia, but it was not able to determine if all alumni indeed find functions in which they are able to apply the skills and knowledge acquired in the research master. 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, first by offering students the opportunity to follow non-academic traineeships in public or private domain, and second, by letting students interview professionals who work in a domain they are interested in. 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 research functions in the public and private domain. It also urges the programme to be very clear and open about the thoroughly competitive nature of an academic career.

### Considerations

Based on its findings the panel judges that the students in the programme without a doubt achieve the intended learning outcomes. The end level is very high, given the outstanding quality of the theses and the manner in which students are prepared for a career as an academic. Students practice publishing in international journals and reports even before they graduate. Many go on to continue their studies as a PhD-candidate. The

programme is aware of the fact that not all students are able to do so and the panel encourages it to continue to think of ways of preparing students for other careers in which advanced and/or transferable research skills are required.

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. A. (Anne) Koch	Anne Koch is Research Professor at University College of Education, Linz (Austria) for Interreligiosity, Religious Pluralism and Study of Religion at Z.I.M.T. Centre of Interreligiosity, Migration Education & Multilingualism.
MA B.J.H. (Bas) Jacobs	Bas Jacobs is a Research Master Student Theology and Religion at University of Amsterdam.

The panel was supported by Jesseka M. Batteau PhD



## Attachment 2 Programme of the Assessment

Schedule external review RM Theology and Religious Studies (via Google Meet)

Thursday 5 November 2020

9.00 – 9.30	<i>Start and preparation panel</i>
9.30 – 10.30	<i>Interview with programme representatives responsible for content and form</i>
10.30 – 10.45	<i>Break</i>
10.45 – 11.45	<i>Interview lecturers master Theology and Religious Studies (incl. Programme Committee-member)</i>
11.45 – 12.45	<i>Break</i>
12.45 – 13.45	<i>Interview students Theology and Religious Studies (incl. Programme Committee-member)</i>
13.45 – 14.00	<i>Pauze</i>
14.00 – 14.30	<i>Interview Board of Examiners (MA)</i>
14.30 - 14.45	<i>Break</i>
14.45 – 15.45	<i>Show cases and Interview alumni</i>
15.45 – 17.15	<i>Break/ Additional research, formulating conclusions</i>
17.15 – 17.30	<i>Oral feedback</i>

## Attachment 3 Documents

- Self-evaluation report (SER)
- Teaching and Examination Regulations
- Student Information Guide
- Overview curriculum (as part of the SER)
- Quantitative data programme (as part of the SER)
- Overview academic staff and CV's
- Thesis guidelines and assessment form
- Faculty Assessment Plan
- Faculty Assessment Policy
- Test matrix (2019-2020) of the programme
- Assessment forms/guidelines: presentations, papers, tutorials and traineeships
- Overview international teaching partnerships
- List of output by students
- Course information and material:
  - Generic Academic Skills 20-21
  - Generic Academic Skills 19-20
  - Theories of Religion 20-21
  - Theories of Religion 19-20
  - Philosophy of Science 19-20
  - Graduate School ThRS seminars
- Theses of 15 students
- Research Proposals of 5 students