

Assessment report
Limited Framework Programme Assessment
Bachelor Communication and Life Sciences
Wageningen University

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1. Executive summary

In this executive summary, the panel presents the main considerations which led to the assessment of the quality of the Bachelor Communication and Life Sciences programme of Wageningen University, which has been assessed according to the standards of the limited framework, as laid down in the NVAO Assessment framework for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands, as published on 20 December 2016.

As the programme objectives and the intended learning have not been changed, the panel agrees to the considerations put forward by the previous assessment panel. The objectives of the programme as well as the intended learning outcomes are valid and relevant. The profile of the programme is clear, being directed towards communication science education in the context of life sciences. The combination of communication science and life sciences may be considered to be unique.

The panel welcomes the Joint Disciplinary Framework for Communication Science, which has been drafted by the joint programmes in the Netherlands. The panel regards the objectives of this programme to be aligned with this framework.

As the programme curriculum structure and curriculum contents have not been changed, the assessment panel agrees to the considerations put forward by the previous panel. The panel is very appreciative of the curriculum. The curriculum of the programme is very much up to standard and clearly reflects the intended learning outcomes of the programme. The curriculum is strongly interdisciplinary, relating and integrating the communication sciences and life sciences perspectives. In addition, the curriculum is distinctly research-led, education being based upon research in the programme domain. The transdisciplinary orientation of the programme is present, but less pronounced than in the Master Communication Science, Health and Life Sciences programme. The panel recommends to continue promoting interest among students for the University Honours Programme.

The panel shares the favourable views of the previous panel with regard to the lecturers and their qualifications. Their educational qualifications are up to standard, the interactions between lecturers and students being frequent. The lecturers especially succeed in bringing together the communication science and life sciences dimensions of the programme. The lecturers are very easily approachable for students.

The study methods and the study guidance have not been changed since the previous assessment. The panel's opinions on these subjects are, therefore, in line with the previous panel's views. The study methods reflect the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary contents of the programme. The panel regards the study-guidance in the programme by the programme study advisors to be very well-organised. Other parts of the teaching-learning environment of the programme are adequate. The panel considers the student success rates to be appropriate.

The policies and the quality assurance measures with respect to the examinations and assessments have not been changed since the previous assessment. Therefore, the panel's views are in line with the opinions of the previous panel. This panel approves of the examinations and assessment rules and regulations of the programme and the quality assurance measures in this respect. The panel trusts the policies recently adopted at University level will lead to the more directive and pro-active role of the Examining Board, as advised by the previous panel.

The panel regards the examinations and the examination methods in the programme to be consistent with the course goals and contents.

The panel considers the supervision and assessment processes for the Bachelor theses to be satisfactory. The panel makes, however, some recommendations to improve these processes further. In line with the advice of the previous panel, this panel recommends to no longer allow unsatisfactory scores for assessment subcategories to be compensated for. All subcategories ought to be at least satisfactory. The panel also advises to use pre-determined, fixed weights for the assessment categories. In addition, the panel proposes to make more transparent the process of the two examiners reaching their combined assessment. The panel also suggests to clarify and to detail the rules applying in case the two examiners do not reach an agreement and third examiners would be needed.

The panel considers the Bachelor theses to meet the programme requirements. The panel supports the previous panel's advice to require students to do empirical research in their thesis. As the length of the theses differs substantially and as some were rather lengthy, the panel proposes to require students to complete more concise and more focused theses, maybe having the journal article format. The panel recommends to assure the communication science contents of the theses to be up to standard, both in terms of theory and in terms of methodology. The panel also advises to inform students about research ethics and research data management practices and rules. The panel suggests to have external examiners reviewing the theses on a regular basis.

The panel considers students completing the programme to have reached the intended learning outcomes of the programme and regards the programme to offer suitable preparation for master programmes in the programme domain.

The panel which conducted the assessment of the Bachelor Communication and Life Sciences programme of Wageningen University assesses this programme to meet the standards of the limited framework, as laid down in the NVAO Assessment framework for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands, judging the programme to be satisfactory. Therefore, the panel advises NVAO to accredit the programme.

Rotterdam, 19 April 2019

Prof. dr. H. Vandebosch
(panel chair)

drs. W. Vercouteren
(panel secretary)

2. Assessment process

The evaluation agency Certiked VBI received the request by Wageningen University to coordinate the limited framework programme assessment process for the Bachelor Communication and Life Sciences programme of this University. This objective of the programme assessment process was to assess whether the programme would conform to the standards of the limited framework, as laid down in the NVAO Assessment framework for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands, published on 20 December 2016 (Staatscourant nr. 69458).

Management of the programmes in the assessment cluster Communication Sciences convened to discuss the composition of the assessment panel and to draft the list of candidates.

Having conferred with Wageningen University programme management, Certiked invited candidate panel members to sit on the assessment panel. The panel members agreed to do so. The panel composition was as follows:

- Prof. dr. H. Vandebosch, professor Department of Communication Sciences, University of Antwerp (panel chair);
- Prof. dr. A.A. Maes, professor Communication and Cognition, Tilburg University (panel member);
- Prof. dr. T. Smits, professor Faculty of Social Sciences, Leuven University (panel member);
- C.H.W. Buurman, chair Logeion, Netherlands Association for Communication Professionals (panel member);
- P.A.M. Kwakman BSc, student Research Master Communication Science, University of Amsterdam, (student member).

On behalf of Certiked, drs. W. Vercouteren served as the process coordinator and secretary in the assessment process.

All panel members and the secretary confirmed in writing being impartial with regard to the programme to be assessed and observing the rules of confidentiality. Having obtained the authorisation by the University, Certiked requested the approval of NVAO of the proposed panel to conduct the assessment. NVAO has given the approval.

Upon request by the programme, NVAO agreed to the reduced scope assessment for the programme (lichte inpassingsbeoordeling; letter NVAO/20182303/ND; 15 August 2018). This assessment may be applied in case the time elapsed between the previous assessment and the current assessment is substantially shorter than under normal circumstances. This may be the consequence of programme accreditation periods having to fit the NVAO assessment schedule. The previous assessment of this programme was in the Autumn of 2016. The reduced scope assessment implies the assessment panel essentially takes the findings, considerations and judgements of the previous panel as their own findings, considerations and judgements, unless there are serious reasons to deviate from these. Reasons to deviate can be that important changes were implemented in the programme since the previous assessment.

Reasons to deviate may also be that the assessment panel finds information being different from or contrary to the information the previous panel based their considerations and judgements on. In that case, intensification of the assessment process may be required and findings, considerations or judgements may be different from those in the previous assessment.

In the course of the assessment process, this assessment panel did not find any reasons to deviate materially from the findings, considerations or judgements of the previous panel. Programme management listed the changes made to the programme since the previous assessment and presented these changes to the panel in the state-of-affairs report. These changes were considered by the panel to be not substantial. This assessment panel did not find any information pointing in directions other than those taken by the previous panel. Therefore, this panel essentially has taken the findings, considerations and judgements of the previous panel as their own findings, considerations and judgements.

To prepare the assessment process, the process coordinator convened with management of the programme to discuss the state-of-affairs report, the subjects to be addressed in this report and the site visit schedule. In addition, the planning of the activities in preparation of the site visit were discussed. In the course of the process preparing for the site visit, programme management and the process coordinator had contact to fine-tune the process. The activities prior to the site visit have been performed as planned. Programme management approved of the site visit schedule.

Well in advance of the site visit date, programme management sent the list of final projects of graduates of the programme of the most recent years. Acting on behalf of the assessment panel, the process coordinator selected six final projects. The grade distribution in the selection was ensured to conform to the grade distribution in the list, sent by programme management. The number of six final projects instead of the regular number of fifteen final projects was agreed upon by NVAO within the framework of the reduced scope assessment process.

The panel chair and panel members were sent the state-of-affairs report of the programme, including appendices. In addition, the expert panel members were forwarded a number of final projects of the programme graduates, these final projects being part of the selection made by the process coordinator.

Prior to the site visit date, the panel chair and the process coordinator discussed the state-of-affairs report, the procedures regarding this reduced scope assessment process and the site visit schedule. The profile of panel chairs of NVAO was discussed as well. The panel chair was informed about the competencies, listed in the profile. Documents pertaining to a number of these competencies were presented to the panel chair. The meeting between the panel chair and the process coordinator served as the briefing for panel chairs, as meant in the NVAO profile of panel chairs.

Prior to the date of the site visit, all panel members sent in their preliminary findings, based on the state-of-affairs report and the final projects studied, and a number of questions to be put to the programme representatives on the day of the site visit. The panel secretary summarised this information, compiling a list of questions, which served as a starting point for the discussions with the programme representatives during the site visit.

Shortly before the site visit date, the entire panel met to go over the preliminary findings concerning the quality of the programme. During this meeting, the preliminary findings of the panel members, including those about the final projects were discussed. The procedures to be adopted during the site visit, including the questions to be put to the programme representatives, were discussed as well.

On 10 January 2019, the panel conducted the site visit on the Wageningen University campus. The site visit schedule was in accordance with the schedule as planned. In a number of separate sessions, panel members were given the opportunity to meet with Faculty representatives, programme management, lecturers and final projects examiners, and students.

In a closed session at the end of the site visit, the panel considered the findings, considerations and judgements regarding the programme. At the end of the site visit, the panel chair presented a broad outline of the considerations and judgements to programme representatives.

Clearly separated from the process of the programme assessment, the assessment panel members and programme representatives met to conduct the development dialogue, with the objective to discuss future developments of the programme.

The assessment draft report was finalised by the secretary, having taken into account the findings and considerations of the panel. The draft report was sent to the panel members, who studied it and made a number of changes. Thereupon, the secretary edited the final report. This report was presented to programme management to be corrected for factual inaccuracies. Programme management was given two weeks to respond. Having been corrected for these factual inaccuracies, the Certiked bureau sent the report to the University Board to accompany their request for re-accreditation of this programme.

3. Programme administrative information

Name programme in CROHO: B Communication and Life Sciences (B Communicatie en Life Sciences)
Orientation, level programme: Academic Bachelor
Grade: BSc
Number of credits: 180 EC
Specialisations: None
Location: Wageningen
Mode of study: Full-time (instruction language Dutch/English)
Registration in CROHO: 21PI-50016

Name of institution: Wageningen University
Status of institution: Government-funded University
Institution's quality assurance: Approved

4. Findings, considerations and assessments per standard

4.1 Standard 1: Intended learning outcomes

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

Findings

The Bachelor Communication and Life Sciences programme is offered by Wageningen University. Wageningen University is a one-faculty University. The Board of Education, being composed of four professors and four students, is responsible for all programmes of the Faculty. The Programme Committee is responsible for the contents and the quality of the Bachelor Communication and Life Sciences and the Master Communication, Health and Life Sciences programmes, this responsibility is subject to the approval of the Board of Education. The Programme Committee is composed of an equal number of staff members and students. The programme director is in charge of the day-to-day management and support activities of both programmes mentioned. Courses within the programme are taught by Chair Groups within the University. The programme director maintains contacts with Chair Groups regarding design, contents and quality of the courses they deliver. The learning goals, contents, teaching methods and assessment methods are subject to the approval of the Programme Committee and the Board of Education. Each year, in the Education Modification Cycle, these are discussed.

The objectives and the intended learning outcomes of the Bachelor Communication and Life Sciences programme have not been changed since the previous assessment. The programme is focused on societal challenges in life sciences context. Communication science subjects and methods taught in the programme are directed towards addressing these challenges. The close relationship and interaction between communication science and natural sciences or life sciences distinguish the programme from other communication science programmes in the Netherlands. Graduates of the programme are educated to analyse the role of communication at the levels of the individual, organisations and society. Programme graduates can support the design of communicative interventions and strategies in the life sciences context.

The name of the programme has been changed to better reflect the objectives and the intended learning outcomes of the programme.

The programme objectives meet the requirements of the Joint Disciplinary Framework for Communication Science, which was drafted recently by the joint Communication Science programmes in the Netherlands.

Considerations

As the programme objectives and the intended learning have not been changed, the panel agrees to the considerations put forward by the previous assessment panel. The objectives of the programme as well as the intended learning outcomes are valid and relevant. The profile of the programme is clear, being directed towards communication science education in the context of life sciences. The combination of communication science and life sciences may be considered to be unique.

The panel welcomes the Joint Disciplinary Framework for Communication Science, which has been drafted by the joint programmes in the Netherlands. The panel regards the objectives of this programme to be aligned with this framework.

Assessment of this standard

These considerations have led the assessment panel to assess standard 1, Intended learning outcomes, to be satisfactory.

4.2 Standard 2: Teaching-learning environment

The curriculum, the teaching-learning environment and the quality of the teaching staff enable the incoming students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

Findings

The number of incoming students decreased in 2013 to 2015 to rise again to previous levels with the influx of 24 students in 2016 and 27 students in 2017.

The curriculum spans three years and the study load amounts to 180 EC. The curriculum has remained unchanged since the previous assessment. The curriculum is composed of theoretical and more practice-oriented communication science courses and broader social sciences courses. In the second and third year, more advanced courses are scheduled. Although the curriculum matches the programme intended learning outcomes, the programme started the process of aligning the courses more strictly to the intended learning outcomes. This is less straightforward, as courses in the programme may be part of other programmes as well. The previous panel advised the programme to promote more students entering the University Honours Programme. Although in recent years about 20 % of the students chose to do so, nearly all of them dropped out early in this programme. The primary reason for not continuing was the research-based orientation of the programme, whereas students would have preferred more practice-based orientations.

About two-third of the lecturers are members of the Wageningen University graduate schools for research in the programme domain. Lecturers meet quite frequently both in formal and informal settings to discuss the programme.

The study methods in the programme are aligned to the programme objectives and meet the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary features of the programme. At the beginning of the curriculum, study advisors meet with students individually and assist them in drafting their study plans. Study plans are coherent sets of courses, outlining students' preferred study paths. Throughout the programme, study advisors are available for study guidance. Students on a regular basis are given feedback by their lecturers. Students have access to a range of educational services and facilities. These are well-organised and promote students' learning processes. The number of drop-outs in the programme is limited. The student success rates after three years vary substantially between about 25 % and about 60 %. The student success rates after four years are far more stable and are on average 85 % (figures for last four cohorts; proportions of students re-entering in the second year).

Considerations

As the programme curriculum structure and curriculum contents have not been changed, the assessment panel agrees to the considerations put forward by the previous panel. The panel is very appreciative of the curriculum. The curriculum of the programme is very much up to standard and clearly reflects the intended learning outcomes of the programme. The curriculum is strongly interdisciplinary, relating and integrating the communication sciences and life sciences perspectives. In addition, the curriculum is distinctly research-led, education being based upon research in the programme domain. The transdisciplinary orientation of the programme is present, but less pronounced than in the Master

Communication Science, Health and Life Sciences programme. The panel recommends to continue promoting interest among students for the University Honours Programme.

The panel shares the favourable views of the previous panel with regard to the lecturers and their qualifications. Their educational qualifications are up to standard, the interactions between lecturers and students being frequent. The lecturers especially succeed in bringing together the communication science and life sciences dimensions of the programme. The lecturers are very easily approachable for students.

The study methods and the study guidance have not been changed since the previous assessment. The panel's opinions on these subjects are, therefore, in line with the previous panel's views. The study methods reflect the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary contents of the programme. The panel regards the study-guidance in the programme by the programme study advisors to be very well-organised. Other parts of the teaching-learning environment of the programme are adequate. The panel considers the student success rates to be appropriate.

Assessment of this standard

These considerations have led the assessment panel to assess standard 2, Teaching-learning environment, to be good.

4.3 Standard 3: Student assessment

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

The programme examination and assessment rules and regulations are appropriate. The Examining Board for Social Sciences monitors the quality of examinations and assessments of the programme. The Examining Board, among other things, appoints examiners, regularly reviews the examinations and assessments of Chair Groups and handles cases of fraud or plagiarism. Since the previous assessment, on the University level the budgets available for Examining Boards have been increased. In addition, the relations between the Board of Education, the Programme Committee and the Examining Board have been strengthened. The reviews of examinations and assessments of the Chair Groups will be conducted more frequently. Currently, on university level it will be determined which form suits best and which frequency is optimal.

The examinations and the examination methods for the courses are aligned with the course learning goals.

The Bachelor theses are individual projects. Theses are completed at one of the Chair Groups, participating in the programme. In the course of the thesis process, students are guided individually by their supervisor. Students may also meet in thesis rings, being small groups of students working on their theses. Draft versions of theses may be submitted and will be given feedback on by the supervisor. Following up on the previous panel's advice, all theses include abstracts. The thesis is carried out under the supervision of one of the core Chair Groups, either Strategic Communication (COM) or Knowledge, Technology and Innovation (KTI). The thesis is co-supervised by a Chair Group from the students' chosen life-science domain. The thesis is assessed by both supervisors and an examiner. The co-supervisor ensures that the research questions are relevant for the life-science domain and supports the integration of life-science knowledge. The examiner is usually from the same core Chair Group as the first supervisor. Examiner and first supervisor (70 %) together with the co-supervisor (30 %) decide on the final mark for the thesis. The overall thesis quality is assessed with regard to four groups of criteria: research skills (30 % to 40 %), the thesis report (50 % to 60 %), the oral presentation (5 %, compulsory as of academic year 2015/2016), and the final discussion with the examiner and the supervisors (5 %). If they do not succeed in reaching consensus, another examiner may be involved to determine the grade. For their assessments, the examiners use rubrics assessment forms.

Considerations

The policies with respect to the examinations and assessments and the measures taken to assure the quality of examinations and assessments have not been changed since the previous assessment. Therefore, the panel's views are in line with the opinions of the previous panel. This panel approves of the examinations and assessment rules and regulations of the programme and the measures taken to assure the quality of examinations and assessments. The panel trusts the policies recently adopted at university level will lead to the more directive and pro-active role of the Examining Board, as advised by the previous panel.

The panel regards the examinations and the examination methods in the programme to be consistent with the course goals and contents.

The panel considers the supervision and assessment processes for the Bachelor theses to be satisfactory. The panel would, however, make some recommendations to improve these processes further. In line with the advice of the previous panel, this panel recommends to no longer allow unsatisfactory scores for assessment subcategories to be compensated for. All subcategories ought to be at least satisfactory. The panel also advises to use pre-determined, fixed weights for the assessment categories. In addition, the panel proposes to make the process of the two examiners reaching their combined assessment more transparent. The panel also suggests to clarify and to detail the rules applying in case the two examiners do not reach an agreement and third examiners would be needed.

Assessment of this standard

The considerations have led the assessment panel to assess standard 3, Student assessment, to be satisfactory.

4.4 Standard 4: Achieved learning outcomes

The programme demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.
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Findings

The Bachelor theses should include communication science theory to be applied in life sciences contexts. For the theses, students have several options and may choose either systematic literature reviews or empirical studies or the combination of both. The study load of the thesis is 12 EC, preceded by the preparatory course (6 EC). The previous panel advised to raise the number of credits for the Bachelor thesis and to require students to conduct empirical research. The programme put forward the reasons for not following up on the previous panel's advice, one of the reasons being the changes of the curriculum structure this would entail. The panel studied a total number of six Bachelor theses with different grades.

For the programme, the external advisory board has been installed to align the programme to professional field requirements.

As has been said, the programme graduates continue their studies at master level in the programme domain.

Considerations

The panel considers the Bachelor theses to meet the programme requirements and to exhibit at least satisfactory levels of knowledge and skills on the part of the students. The panel supports the previous panel's advice to require students to do empirical research in their thesis. As the length of the theses differs substantially and as some were rather lengthy, the panel proposes to require students to complete more concise and more focused theses, maybe having the journal article format. The panel recommends to assure the communication science contents of the theses to be up to standard, both in terms of theory and in terms of methodology. The panel also advises to inform students about practices and rules regarding research ethics and research data management. In addition, the panel suggests to have external examiners reviewing the theses on a regular basis, as the panel members in some cases came to other grades for the theses than the programme examiners had given.

The panel considers students completing the programme to have reached the intended learning outcomes of the programme and regards the programme to offer suitable preparation for master programmes in the programme domain.

Assessment of this standard

The considerations have led the assessment panel to assess standard 4, Achieved learning outcomes, to be satisfactory.

5. Overview of assessments

Standard	Assessment
Standard 1. Intended learning outcomes	Satisfactory
Standard 2: Teaching-learning environment	Good
Standard 3: Student assessment	Satisfactory
Standard 4: Achieved learning outcomes	Satisfactory
Programme	Satisfactory

6. Recommendations

In this report, a number of recommendations by the panel have been listed. For the sake of clarity, these have been brought together below. These panel recommendations are the following.

- To continue promoting interest among students for the University Honours Programme.
- To no longer allow in the thesis assessment unsatisfactory scores for assessment subcategories to be compensated for.
- To adopt pre-determined, fixed weights for the assessment categories in the thesis assessment.
- To make more transparent the process of the two examiners reaching their combined assessment of the Bachelor thesis.
- To clarify and detail the rules applying in case the two Bachelor thesis examiners do not reach an agreement and third examiners would be needed.
- To require students to do empirical research in their thesis.
- To require students to complete more concise and more focused theses, maybe having the journal article format.
- To assure the communication science contents of the theses are up to standard, both in terms of theory and in terms of methodology.
- To inform students about practices and rules regarding research ethics and research data management.
- To have external examiners reviewing the theses on a regular basis.