

Master programme in Organic Agriculture Summary judgement

This report provides the findings and considerations of the Life Sciences committee on the master programme in Organic Agriculture at Wageningen University. The committee assessment is based on information in the critical reflection, interviews during the site visit and a selection of theses.

Standard 1: Intended Learning Outcomes

As a result of increased environmental concern and consumer interest, Organic Agriculture is now globally recognized as a defined sector. In order to meet the challenge of producing healthy, socially responsible and ecologically sound food, the master programme in Organic Agriculture explores food production, food consumption and multi-functional land use from the viewpoint of many disciplines, multiple perspectives and different geographical scales. A system approach therefore characterizes both the research and education domains in organic agriculture. The programme prepares students for a wide range of positions related to multiple land use, organic agriculture and the food production chain.

The master programme in Organic Agriculture has clearly succeeded in positioning itself next to the other master programmes. It is an academic programme that supplies graduates all over the world. Similar to the other programmes the profile on paper could improve, especially since the programme management has clear and impressive ideas about the objective and profile of the programme. The committee is positive regarding the intended learning outcomes. Although general, they clearly lead to graduates at the intended academic level and orientation. The relation with the professional field is good. The committee concludes that international requirements of the field and discipline are met.

Standard 2: Teaching-Learning Environment

The committee has studied the various aspects of the teaching and learning environment and believes it is extremely well organized. The programme was renewed in 2007, following recommendations of students, and adopted a teaching and learning environment that mimics many of the principles underlying organic agriculture: experimental, authentic, interactive and interdisciplinary. The curriculum has been designed to provide a balance between fundamental and applied science. Contributing Chair Groups work in various areas, thus achieving an interdisciplinary and integrated programme.

Specific courses have been developed to ensure that the learning experience is more than the sum of the individual contributions of the Chair Groups involved. The committee specifically mentions the *Master class Organic Agriculture* as an interesting course that stimulates multidisciplinary. The committee concluded that the programme was clearly designed by the programme management, who did so very successfully. Despite the large number of electives, the programme clearly forms an entity. The one criticism is that the university wide used year schedule does not provide space and time for a unique course like the *Master class Organic Agriculture*. The Education Institute and programme management should find a solution to deal with the additional study load this course adds to the regular programme.

A balanced combination of teaching methods is used in the different courses. The course coordinator and lecturers clearly search for the best teaching methods to realise the learning outcomes of the course. The committee considers the programme a best practice, regarding the amount of attention paid to feedback and reflection on the programme and the courses. The

committee was impressed by the collaboration between management, staff, students and programme committees in their focus to continuously improve the programmes.

The student-staff ratio enables frequent interaction between staff and students. Research qualities of the staff are impressive. Also, the staff is involved in continuously improving their didactical skills. Student support and facilities are good. Especially the before mentioned support by the study advisers is a valuable asset to the programmes. Without this support it would be impossible to run these programmes. Approximately 25% of the enrolling students is Dutch. Over the years the number of students starting the programme increased from 11 in 2003 to 32 in 2010. Overall, teaching-learning environment impressed the committee a lot.

Standard 3: Assessment and achieved learning outcomes

The committee is very positive with regard to the initiatives Wageningen University is currently implementing in the bachelor and master programmes. The Examining Boards are in the process of strengthening their role in ensuring the quality of assessment and seem committed to formalizing the assessment system. The secretaries of the four committees have a key role in the communication between programme management and Examining Board. Each programme at Wageningen University standardized the filling in of free choice credits. The programme is on schedule to implement the new initiatives. The use of course guides makes the assessment procedures very clear and transparent, and they are very useful to the students.

The learning outcomes at the course level are connected to the intended learning outcomes at the programme level. The committee is very positive about the use of different assessment strategies within and between courses. Although formalization of the assessment strategy is still in progress, the committee is convinced that it will be a good strategy. The committee especially values the use of the rubric for the thesis. The committee encourages the programme management to use the rubric conscientiously, as in other programmes it appears to have had a positive effect on the verification of the grades. The committee concludes that the programme provides a balanced set of assessments.

Overall, the committee was impressed by the level of the theses, and it agreed with all the grades. In none of the programmes the committee found a thesis that should not have passed. It was clear to the committee that the thesis projects are executed in excellent research surroundings. It would be beneficial to the students to equalize the outlines of the thesis projects. The success rates fluctuate strongly as a result of low student numbers. On average, 42-76% of the students finish the programme within two years, and up to 87% in three years. Almost all international students complete the programme within two years. Since 2007 the drop-out rates have been strongly reduced, coinciding with the new design of the programme. In addition to PhD positions, graduates start outside academia in a wide variety of functions in the domain and level of the programme

General conclusion

The committee assessed the standards from the Assessment Framework for Limited Programme Assessments in the following way:

Master programme in Organic Agriculture:

Standard 1: Intended learning outcomes	good
Standard 2: Teaching-learning environment	excellent
Standard 3: Assessment and achieved learning outcomes	good
General conclusion	good