



NVAO • NEDERLAND

# **WO-MASTER SOCIETAL RESILIENCE (RESEARCH)**

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

ASSESSMENT OF CONDITIONAL INITIAL  
ACCREDITATION

SEPTEMBER 2019





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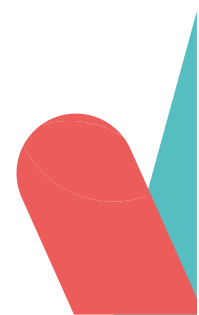
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# 1 Description of the programme

Institution	: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Programme	: Societal Resilience (research)
Level	: Master
Orientation	: Academic (in Dutch: wo)
Degree	: Master of Science
Location	: Amsterdam
Study load	: 120 ECTS
Mode of study	: Full-time
CROHO section	: Gedrag en maatschappij



## 2 Executive Summary

The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) received a request for an initial accreditation procedure with regard to the academically oriented research master Societal Resilience of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. NVAO convened an expert panel, which first visited the programme in 2018 and issued an advisory report on May 31<sup>st</sup> of that year. In this report, the panel noted that the relevance of the programme's objectives and its chosen multidisciplinary approach were clear. Furthermore, the panel was of the opinion that the intended learning outcomes had been formulated as concrete assessable knowledge, behaviour and skills of the graduates. The panel also approved of the overall research learning environment, the curriculum design and the highly qualified teaching staff. The panel found the assessment methods presented in the course descriptions relevant, diverse and developed in a sound manner.

However, the panel was not completely convinced on a number of issues. In the panel's view, there was insufficient evidence that the programme had all the necessary elements in place to achieve its intended integration of substantive content with methods, interdisciplinary knowledge and disciplinary prospects. The panel was of the opinion that the multi-method and multidisciplinary approach that lies at the core of the programme's philosophy should explicitly and systematically be a part of the curriculum and its components.

A second issue concerned the assessment plan. Considering both the broad inflow of students and the broad scope of subjects offered within the programme, the panel expected there to be more written tests in which knowledge acquisition could be tested. Also, personal feedback, e.g. on research papers produced by the students, were not mentioned in the application file. Therefore, the panel required the programme to develop a balanced assessment plan which included written tests such as exams, particularly for the substantive courses, as well as personal feedback.

### Conditions

The panel advised NVAO to take a conditionally positive decision regarding the quality of the academically oriented research master Societal Resilience of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The panel listed the following conditions, to be fulfilled within 15 months:

1. The multi-method and multidisciplinary approach and the integration of methods and substantive disciplinary prospects should explicitly and systematically be a part of the curriculum, curriculum description and its components.
2. The programme should develop a balanced assessment plan which includes written tests (for example exams), in particular for the substantive courses, as well as personal feedback.

NVAO followed these conditions, and decided to add the following recommendation of the panel to the first condition: the programme needs to address the imbalance in the spectrum and mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods in the curriculum.

NVAO took a conditionally positive decision regarding the master programme on July 31 2018. NVAO set two conditions that the new master programme should fulfil within a 15 month period. To show that the conditions have been met, the institution has submitted an additional file with NVAO on April 29 2019.

### Assessment

The panel appreciates the steps the programme has taken to make improvements. Concerning the first condition, the panel sees an improved integration of methods and substantive disciplinary prospects in the revised course manuals, providing students with hands-on empirical work that requires linking insights from substantive theories in a variety of disciplines to



methodological choices. The ambition of conducting cutting edge social science research on societal challenges using a multidisciplinary and multi-method approach has been adequately translated into the curriculum and its components. It is also clear to the panel that sufficient efforts have been taken to address to imbalance in the mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Concerning the second condition, the panel has established that the assessment plan has been revised substantially and is now more balanced. The panel approves of the use of a conceptual model to guide the assessment plan. Based on the addendum to the assessment plan, the panel was able to determine that the assessment forms used in the substantive courses are adequate for the assessment of theoretical knowledge and insight. Furthermore, the programme made clear that in a number of courses personal feedback will be provided to students on both draft versions submitted halfway through a course as well as on final submissions.

These considerations led the panel to conclude that the conditions, that are part of the conditionally positive decision on the initial accreditation of the research master Societal Resilience, have been met. Therefore the panel advises NVAO to take a positive decision regarding the quality of the research master Societal Resilience of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

On behalf of the initial accreditation panel convened to assess the academic oriented research master Societal Resilience of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

Leiden, 13 September 2019

Prof. dr. J. Mesman  
(chair)

Aurelie van 't Slot MA  
(secretary)



### 3 Assessment of conditional initial accreditation

In its decision of July 31 2018 on the aforementioned request for an initial accreditation, NVAO made a positive conditional decision. NVAO set two conditions that the new master programme should fulfil within a 15 month period. To show that the conditions have been met, the institution has submitted an additional file with NVAO on April 29 2019.

The panel has posed a number of questions for clarification about the additional file. These questions were sent to the master programme on July 4 2019. The programme has answered these questions in writing and the answers have been received by NVAO on July 29 2019.

On request from NVAO, the panel has assessed on September 13 2019 whether the institution has thereby met the conditions that were stipulated in the accreditation decision. The advisory report of the panel was put together as a result of a written consultation. On September 24 2019 one minor error was corrected at the request of the university.

#### 3.1 Condition 1

##### *Condition*

The multi-method and multidisciplinary approach and the integration of methods and substantive disciplinary prospects should explicitly and systematically be a part of the curriculum, curriculum description and its components. The programme needs to address the imbalance in the spectrum and mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods in the curriculum.

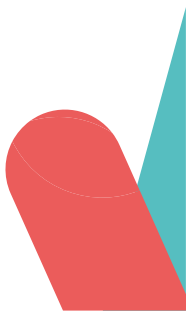
##### *Outline of findings*

In its 2018 advisory report, the panel made a number of critical remarks in relation to the translation of the intended learning outcomes into objectives of the curriculum. In the first place, the panel stated that the programme's ambition of the integrated multidisciplinary and multi-method approach was not adequately translated into the curriculum description and its components. In the second place, the panel advised the programme to address the imbalance in the spectrum and mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods in the curriculum.

The programme has taken a number of steps to further operationalize its ambition of conducting cutting edge social science research on societal challenges in a multidisciplinary way, using multiple methods. In the past year, the course coordinators have worked systematically to develop full manuals for their courses in which the multidisciplinary and multi-method approach is fully integrated. The course manuals describe in a detailed way the link between the intended learning outcomes of the programme and teaching goals of the courses, the learning activities the students will undertake to achieve these learning goals, and the way in which their performance will be assessed. The course manuals also show that the topics of courses are aimed to be viewed from a multidisciplinary perspective. Specific examples of how this multidisciplinary perspective manifests in various courses were listed in the documentation provided to the panel.

Next to the courses being multidisciplinary by design, the documentation also made clear that the multidisciplinary approach is embedded in the didactic methods employed throughout the programme, such as modelling and peer group learning. In each course, students are challenged to collaborate in smaller groups in which they actively use their own disciplinary background knowledge. They are asked to identify and discuss the features and complementarities of different social science disciplines. Course coordinators are able to facilitate this discussion by co-teaching classes.

To address the imbalance between the mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, the programme has endeavoured to fine-tune the courses the panel reviewed in May 2018 and to design the other courses of the programme with respect to the role and position of qualitative methods in relation to quantitative methods. In the documentation it is explained how students





work in a multi-methodological way throughout the two-year study programme. In describing its vision on the role of quantitative and qualitative research methods, the programme emphasizes their importance to describe, predict, understand and explain the complexity of societal challenges.

In the documentation provided to the panel, the programme describes how it integrates methods and substantive disciplinary prospects by having students work with data on topics studied in different disciplines throughout the social sciences. Disciplinary perspectives are coupled with a growing independence in acquiring the skills to collect, analyse, and interpret big data using both qualitative and quantitative techniques. However, when reading the course manuals, the panel only found implicit references to the integration of methods and substantive disciplinary prospects. It therefore sent a request for clarification to summarize the linkages explicitly, both schematically and in the texts of the course descriptions.

In its reply to this request, the programme presented the panel with a table in which, next to the relation between the courses and the intended learning outcomes, two additional columns were added to describe the way in which the programme integrates methods and disciplines into a multidisciplinary and multi-method approach. Additionally, the panel received revised texts of all course manuals in which a section 'Integration of methods and disciplines' was added to describe the approach for each course.

#### *Considerations*

In the view of the panel, the revised course manuals show improved integration of methods and content, providing students with hands-on empirical work that requires linking insights from substantive theories in a variety of disciplines to methodological choices. This integration is seen in each of the substantive courses, as well as in the methodological courses. The inclusion of co-teaching with staff from different fields also helps to achieve integration. The panel agreed that the additional information was sufficient to clarify any remaining questions.

It is clear to the panel that efforts have been taken to address the imbalance in the spectrum and mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods in the curriculum. The panel has established that three out of four substantive courses explicitly include a learning goal about being able to evaluate strengths and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative methods. In courses dedicated to methodology, the distinction and complementary nature of these methods are addressed. The panel is of the opinion that the programme has taken sufficient steps to meet this condition.

#### *Conclusion*

Condition 1 has been met.

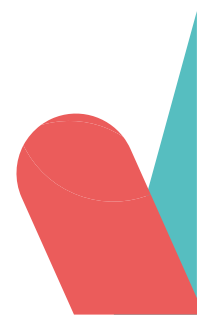
## 3.2 Condition 2

#### *Condition*

The programme should develop a balanced assessment plan which includes written tests (for example exams), in particular for the substantive courses, as well as personal feedback.

#### *Outline of the findings*

In its 2018 advisory report, the panel noted that considering the broad inflow of students and the broad scope of subjects offered in the programme, it expected there to be more written tests than envisaged with which knowledge can be tested so that the programme and the Examination Board can guarantee and verify that each student has achieved the desired level. In addition, the panel expected that students would receive personal feedback on major writing assignments, such as the project proposal for the course 'Writing a Research Proposal'. It therefore recommended the programme to develop a balanced assessment plan in which written tests and feedback opportunities would be included.



In the new documentation, the programme describes a number of measures it has taken to address these shortcomings. The programme has reviewed the suitability of the forms of assessment for each course as tools to assess student progress in achieving the learning objectives. Particularly in year 1, written exams have been added to the test formats for the courses 'Qualitative or Quantitative Data Analysis' and 'Foundations of Societal Resilience'. According to the programme, these courses are well-suited for assessment through written exams because of their theoretical content.

In the revised assessment plan, an overview of teaching and assessment methods per course has been included. This overview shows that within a number of courses, personal feedback will be provided to the individual student. The assessment plan briefly elaborates on the role feedback has within the programme, which puts a lot of emphasis on peer-review. Furthermore, the course manuals clearly describe the various ways in which feedback will be made available to students.

However, despite its recommendation, the panel found that the programme had only marginally added written exams to substantive courses. Instead, the programme chose to enrich these courses with research (b)logs, a poster with an accompanying extended abstract or a theoretical paper. Therefore, in order to ensure that the knowledge obtained in the substantive courses is assessed, the panel requested further clarification on how such assessments test the acquired knowledge.

The programme subsequently provided the panel with clarification on this concern in the form of an addendum to the assessment plan. Therein the programme offers an overview of how it assesses the knowledge that students obtain in substantive courses, as well as which forms of assessment are used.

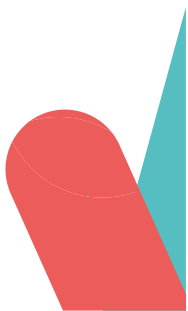
#### *Considerations*

The panel has established that the assessment plan has been revised substantially and is now more balanced. The panel approves the use of a conceptual model to guide the assessment plan. Based on the addendum to the assessment plan, the panel was able to determine that the assessment forms used in the substantive courses are adequate for the assessment of theoretical knowledge and insight.

Initially, the panel was wary about the emphasis placed on feedback through peer-review. However, in the addendum, it was made clear that next to feedback from fellow participants, students will receive feedback from course instructor(s) on both draft versions submitted halfway through a course, as well as on final versions of their posters or research papers. The panel views this as positive and advises the programme to include this information when introducing the assessment plan and course manuals to students.

#### *Conclusion*

Condition 2 has been met.



## Annex: Composition of the panel

The panel which assessed the quality of the research master programme Societal Resilience of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam consisted of the following members:

- prof. dr. Judi Mesman, Professor of Interdisciplinary Study of Societal Challenges, Leiden University (panel chair);
- prof dr. Peer Scheepers, Professor of Comparative Research Methodology and Vice-Dean of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences, Radboud University Nijmegen;
- prof. dr. Michaela Maier, Professor in Applied Communication Science, University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany;
- Stijntje Dijk BSC, student MSc Medicine and MA Health Economics, Policy and Law, Erasmus University Rotterdam (student member).

The panel was assisted by Michèle Wera MA, process coordinator NVAO, and Aurelie van 't Slot MA, secretary.

All panel members and the secretary filled in and signed a declaration of independence and impartiality.



