

Research master in
Societal Resilience
(research master)
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

31 May 2018

NVAO Limited initial accreditation Advisory Report

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1 Executive summary

The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) received a request for an initial accreditation procedure, including programme documents, regarding a proposed academic oriented research master in Societal Resilience at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. NVAO convened an expert panel, which studied the information available and discussed the proposed programme with representatives of the institution and the programme during a site visit.

The following considerations have played an important role in the panel's assessment.

Standard 1

The aim of the research master's programme is to train and deliver excellent social scientists who can contribute to societal resilience by analysing complex societal problems, who can work with large quantities of quantitative but also qualitative data, and, who can collaborate in multidisciplinary teams and in co-creation with societal stakeholders that can use the research to design sustainable solutions. The panel recommends a further elaboration of the overarching concept of societal resilience as related to the four key topic areas.

The ambition of the programme and the subjects are relevant and the multidisciplinary and multi-method approach is clear. This is a potential strength. The intended learning outcomes of the programme have been formulated as concrete assessable knowledge, behaviour and skills of the graduates and fit into the Dutch qualification framework. The learning outcomes are benchmarked against the Dublin descriptors and are appropriate for a research oriented academic master's programme. The panel recommends making the intended integration of multidisciplinary and multi-method approach more explicit in the learning outcomes.

Standard 2

The research master in Societal Resilience is a full-time programme of 120 EC. The programme is offered in English and consists of two years. The panel concludes that students of the programme are part of a community of researchers. The programme aims for students to learn skills which combine qualitative and quantitative analyses. This claim appears in the intended learning outcomes, however, in the overview of the programme, there seems to be an emphasis on a narrow set of methods. When questioning both the programme management and the staff about this concern, the panel found that their elaboration regarding the full spectrum of methods taught lacked sufficient detail. The panel considers the imbalance between quantitative and qualitative research methods to deserve further elaboration and explication.

The staff is highly qualified in research and the institution makes clear choices to attract good staff. Most of the staff teaching in the curriculum have strong international reputations and this bodes well for the academic standards that the students will encounter, while also affording students an opportunity to tap into staffs' international research networks. The stakeholders have been involved in the development of the programme and seemed quite engaged.

Although the panel is satisfied with the overall research learning environment, the curriculum design and the highly qualified teaching staff, it has found insufficient evidence that the programme has all the necessary elements in place to achieve its intended integration of substantive content with methods, interdisciplinary knowledge and disciplinary prospects. 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.

Standard 3

The assessment methods presented in the course descriptions are relevant, diverse and developed in a sound manner. The assessment and exam regulations of the master's programme are clearly described in the Teaching and Examination Regulations. Two shortcomings with regards to the assessment system, however, remain. Considering both the broad inflow of students and the broad scope of subjects offered in the programme, the panel expects there to be more written tests in which knowledge acquisition can be tested. Also, personal feedback, e.g. on the research papers produced by the students, is not mentioned in the material yet. The panel therefore requires the programme to develop a balanced assessment plan which includes written tests (for example exams), in particular for the substantive courses, as well as personal feedback.

Conclusion

The panel judges standard 1 as positive. Standard 2 and 3 are judged as partially met. Given these considerations, the panel advises NVAO to take a conditionally positive decision regarding the quality of the proposed research master in Societal Resilience (research master) as offered by the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The panel formulated two conditions. The first is that the multi-method and multidisciplinary approach and the integration of substantive content with methods and disciplinary prospects should explicitly and systematically be a part of the curriculum and the description of its components. Furthermore, the programme needs to address the imbalance in the spectrum and mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods in the curriculum. The second condition is that 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.

Programme extension

The Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam proposes that the programme has a duration of two years (120 EC). The programme management's arguments regard the design of the research master, the range of disciplines, the required level of scientific knowledge, and the necessary competences and skills to work effectively in multidisciplinary research environments. The panel agrees that the qualifications the graduates should have in order for them to be competitive in the international academic job market, cannot be achieved in a programme of less than two years. The panel advises to grant the programme the right to offer a two-year master's programme (120 EC).

The Hague, 31 May 2018

On behalf of the panel,

Prof. dr. J. Mesman
(chair)

Astrid Koster, MSc
(secretary)

2 Procedure

2.1 Peer review

NVAO received a request for an initial accreditation procedure including programme documents regarding a proposed wo-master in Societal Resilience (research). An initial accreditation procedure is required when a recognised institution wants to offer a programme and award a recognised bachelor or master's degree. To a certain extent, initial accreditation demands a different approach to the accreditation procedure for programmes already being offered. Initial accreditation is in fact an ex ante assessment of a programme, and a programme becomes subject to the normal accreditation procedures once initial accreditation has been granted.

Full details of the initial accreditation procedure can be found in the 'Assessment framework for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands' (September 2016) and the 'Specification of additional criteria for research master's programmes' (30 May 2016) published by NVAO (¹). For programmes requesting an extension of the standard programme duration of 60 EC, an explicit panel advice is required (NVAO Protocol for programme extension, 8 October 2003).

2.2 Expert panel

NVAO convened an international panel of experts. The panel consisted of:

- 1) Prof. dr. Judi Mesman, Professor of Interdisciplinary Study of Societal Challenges, Leiden University, Netherlands (chair);
- 2) Prof. dr. Peer Scheepers, Professor of Social Science Research Methodology, Radboud University Nijmegen, Netherlands;
- 3) Prof. dr. Michaela Maier, Professor in Applied Communication Psychology, University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany;
- 4) Lennart van Doremalen MSc, PhD candidate in Subatomic Physics, Utrecht University, Netherlands (student member).

Assisting staff:

- Astrid Koster MSc, secretary (certified);
- Aurelie van 't Slot, policy advisor NVAO and process coordinator.

Thomas de Bruijn, PhD, NVAO policy advisor was present as an observer at the site visit. All the panel members signed a statement of independence and confidentiality.

2.3 Procedure

This composition reflects the expertise deemed necessary by NVAO. (Annex 1: Composition of the panel).

The panel members prepared the assessment by analysing the documents provided by the institution (Annex 3: Documents reviewed). The panel organised a preparatory meeting on 19th April 2018, i.e. the day before the site visit. During this meeting, the panel members shared their first impressions and formulated questions for the site visit.

¹ NVAO website www.nvao.net

The site visit took place on 20th April 2018 at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. During this visit, the panel was able to discuss the formulated questions and to gather additional information during several sessions (Annex 2: Schedule of the site visit). Afterwards, the panel discussed the findings and considerations and pronounced its preliminary assessments per theme and standard. At the end of the site visit, the initial findings were presented to the institution.

Based on the findings, considerations and conclusions, the secretary wrote a draft advisory report that was first presented to the panel members. After the panel members had commented on the draft report, the chair endorsed the report. On 21st May 2018 the advisory report was sent to the institution, which was given the opportunity to respond to any factual inaccuracies in the report. The institution replied on 31st May 2018. The institution did not report any factual inaccuracies. Subsequently the final report was endorsed by the panel chair. The panel composed its advice fully independently and offered it to NVAO on 31st May 2018.

2.4 Panel report

The first chapter of this report is the executive summary of the report. The current chapter is the introduction.

The third chapter gives a description of the programme including its position within the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and within the higher education system of the Netherlands.

The panel presents its assessments in the fourth chapter. The programme is evaluated by assessing the themes and standards in the Initial Accreditation Framework. For each standard the panel presents an outline of its findings, considerations and a conclusion.

The outline of the findings are the objective facts as found by the panel in the programme documents, in the additional documents and during the site visit. The panel's considerations are the panel's subjective evaluations regarding these findings and the importance of each. The considerations presented by the panel logically lead to a concluding assessment.

The panel concludes the report with a table containing an overview of its assessments per standard.

3 Description of the programme

3.1 General

Country	: The Netherlands
Institution	: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Programme	: Research master in Societal Resilience
Level	: master
Orientation	: Academic orientation (in Dutch: wo ²)
Degree	: Master of Science (MSc) (as endorsed by the panel)
Location	: Amsterdam
Study Load (EC)	: 120 EC
Field of Study	: Gedrag en maatschappij (as endorsed by the panel)

3.2 Profile of the institution

The website of the Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam states: “Ever since it was founded in 1880, VU Amsterdam has been known for its distinctive approach to knowledge. VU is an open organization, strongly linked to people and society. What matters is not just the acquisition of a greater depth of knowledge, but also a wider one. We ask and expect our students, researchers, PhD candidates and employees to look further – to look further than their own interests and their own field, and further than what is familiar and further than the here and now.

Academic research and education at VU is characterized by a high level of ambition, and encourages free and open communications and ideas. VU stands for universal university values such as academic freedom and independence, which is reflected in our name (‘VU’ is the Dutch abbreviation for ‘free university’): free from the church, state and any commercial interest. The basic philosophy of VU is expressed in three core values: responsible, open and personally engaged”.

The Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS) offers its students a broad palette of social sciences: Cultural Anthropology, Political Science, Sociology, Public Administration, Organization Science and Communication Science. The education programs of the faculty consist of five bachelor and seven master’s programmes. The faculty is led by the Faculty Board, consisting of the dean, the portfolio holder for teaching, the portfolio holder for research, the director of management and a student assessor. The head of the education office and the director of education support the portfolio holder for teaching. The Faculty Board is supported by different teams: the Education Office, the Research Office, the faculty secretariat, members of the ‘VU Academy of Social Sciences’ for postgraduate courses, and support staff of the university’s central services, including marketing and communications, finance and project control and human resource management.

² wo = wetenschappelijk onderwijs

3.3 Profile of the programme

New programme in the Netherlands

A component of the knowledge infrastructure is the faculty research institute, the Institute of Societal Resilience (ISR). The concept of societal resilience is central to the research projects of the ISR. The institute is organized along the lines of the four themes that also form the basis of the research master in Societal Resilience: care and welfare, interconnectedness, diversity and governance. The ISR is home to a combination of classical disciplines (anthropology, sociology and political science) and modern disciplines (communication science, public administration and organizational sciences), a combination that is unique within the Netherlands. Within the ISR, both multidisciplinary (links between disciplines on shared themes) and transdisciplinary research (links with practice on shared themes) takes place on the basis of these six disciplines.

The Faculty of Social Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam proposes a research master's program in which the concept of societal resilience serves as an analytical and normative framework in the search for sustainable solutions. The research master will thematically be organized around four major societal challenges. The analyses of complex social problems and resilient responses require innovative analytic methods and instruments. The programme document indicates that no other institution of higher education in the Netherlands offers a programme with a similar profile. The application document stated that this mixed big/small data approach offers our students unique skills to explore human behaviour and processes in a completely new way.

4 Assessment per standard

This chapter presents the evaluation by the assessment panel of the standards. The panel has reproduced the criteria for each standard. For each standard the panel presents (1) a brief outline of its findings based on the programme documents and on documents provided by the institution and the site visit, (2) the considerations the panel has taken into account and (3) the conclusion of the panel. The panel presents a conclusion for each of the standards.

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

As described in the application document, the aim of the research master's programme is to train and deliver excellent social scientists who can contribute to societal resilience by analysing complex societal problems, who can work with large quantities of quantitative but also qualitative data, and, who can collaborate in multidisciplinary teams and in co-creation with societal stakeholders that can use the research to design sustainable solutions. Because there is no common theory about societal resilience, in the application report, the programme defines resilience as the ability to mobilise resources for the improvement of welfare in the face of adversity. Therefore, students have to be able to transpose their knowledge to skills, the management explained during the site-visit. The three key elements in the programme's approach to social science research that form the basis for the curriculum are: multidisciplinary, multi-method, and collaborative.

The programme provides students with a background in social science theory, an overview of the most important societal problems that society faces, and perspectives on and theories about societal resilience, the programme stated in the application report. Furthermore, students get a fundamental understanding of the analysis of big data with regard to these problems. They learn to contextualise and enrich these big data by zooming in or supplementing it with 'small data'. To become researchers, regardless whether the focus is on applied research outside academia or on more fundamental research as an academic, the programme mentioned they shall equip students with knowledge and understanding of the relevant research methods, to the level that they will be able to design and carry out research within the field of the social sciences combining small and big data.

The Faculty of Social Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam proposes a research master's programme in which the concept of societal resilience serves as an analytical and normative framework in the search for sustainable solutions. The research master will thematically be organised around four major societal challenges: Care and Welfare, Dynamics of Interconnectedness, Diversity and Inclusion, and Governmental challenges. The analysis of complex social problems and resilient responses require innovative analytic methods and instruments.

Throughout the programme, students develop the ability to critically analyse existing studies as well as new ideas (their own and others') and place academic and societal developments in a broader scientific and societal perspective. Students learn how to contribute to scientific and public debates and understand the social and ethical issues involved and, if necessary, take the necessary steps to satisfy a high ethical standard. Within the programme, students also develop the ability to communicate with peers, the scientific community and the general public, both verbally and in writing, about their research. Students thereafter develop learning skills that enable them to work within an international, diverse, interdisciplinary, and multi-methodological environment. Students are able to judge and regulate their own academic attitude with regard to integrity and social responsibility.

To achieve these aims, the programme formulated 17 learning outcomes. The learning outcomes are related to the Dublin descriptors for master degree programs. For each of the Dublin descriptors the VU describes how they are incorporated in the program. These learning outcomes are also stated in the Teaching and Examination Regulations (TER) of the program.

Considerations

The panel has studied and discussed the aims of the programme and noted that the relevance of the subject and the multidisciplinary approach is clear. They are also ambitious and a potential strength. Furthermore, the focus on big data analysis was very much appreciated by the professional stakeholders, and the professional field regarded the programme as innovative.

The intended learning outcomes of the programme have been formulated as concrete assessable knowledge, behaviour and skills of the graduates and fit into the Dutch qualification framework. The learning outcomes are benchmarked against the Dublin descriptors and are appropriate for an academic oriented research master's programme. However, the benchmark of the programme needs to be better elaborated than the panel could read in the application document. The research nature of the curriculum was also demonstrated clearly during the site visit, especially through comparison with the institute's own regular master's programmes. The panel appreciates the ambition to provide students with a background in social science theory and give an overview of the most important problems that society faces. The panel wondered about the scope of the term 'society' in light of the fact that the international networks and connections mentioned in the application document are almost exclusively Western and predominantly European. During the site visit the programme management clarified that the goal is to cover societies globally.

Although the set of intended learning outcomes is ambitious and realistic, the aim of the integrated approach (multi-method and multi-disciplinary) to answer contemporary research questions is not explicitly present in the intended learning outcomes. The panel recommends the intended integration of the multi-disciplinary and multi-method approach that the discipline requires to be made more explicit in the learning outcomes.

The panel thinks that, despite the fact that students have been consulted about the title of the programme, it does not cover the overall content of the research master's programme. The title refers only to the substantive aspect of the programme while the quantitative methods / data analysis part of the programme does not appear in the title. For that reason, the panel advises to make the match between title and content more consistent and more clearly visible. This is needed to inform potential students and the professional field and manage expectations of what the programme offers.

The panel advises the programme to reconsider the title of the programme and has, during the discussions, found that the management was willing to do so.

The panel concludes that the intended learning outcomes of the programme are sufficient.

Conclusion

Meets the standard

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 research master in Societal Resilience is a full time programme of 120 EC. The programme is offered in English and consists of two years, with each year comprising 60 EC. According to the document, most courses are 6 EC, some are 3 EC and one course ('Big data, Small data') is 9 EC. The internship is 24 EC, whereas the thesis in the second year takes a whole semester (30 EC). An overview of the complete curriculum of the research master in Societal Resilience is given in the application document. The application document also shows how the courses of the research master in Societal Resilience are related to the learning outcomes and the Dublin Descriptors.

Students start the first year with introductory courses about present and future social problems and resilient responses, and about big and small data in the social sciences. During the second semester of the first year, students choose two out of four thematic courses, and specialize methodologically. During the first semester of the second year, students do an internship (24 EC). Students conclude the programme with an individual research project, which forms the basis for a master thesis.

Students in the research master in Societal Resilience do an internship in the first two periods of the second year. In the internship, students apply research skills they have gained during the first year, build their networks and learn how to co-create research with societal stakeholders. Students seek internship possibilities themselves, but the programme supervises this, for instance, because the lecturers' network can help students in finding internship positions. Students formulate their interests, priorities and ambitions in the peer group meetings in period 3 of the first year to start the search. In collaboration with the internship host and the (intended) academic supervisor, the student writes an internship proposal, describing the period, name of supervisor at the host institution, the frequency of meetings, the activities at the internship, the workload for student (days per week) and the deliverables. During the internship, students are supervised by a primary supervisor, who is a member of the teaching staff.

As stated in the application document, the research master's programme in Societal Resilience is characterised by intensive and small scale education. The programme aims to create an environment in which students and the teaching staff are intentionally producing knowledge together. Therefore, a core component of the programme is peer group learning, organized parallel to the main courses, which includes working groups, thematic interest

groups and intervision. Peer group learning offers students sustained guidance in all stages of their individual and collaborative research. Students discuss research developments in the field of societal resilience. They provide each other with feedback on the progress of projects and form small intervision groups.

The application document shows the scores from the most recent research inspections. The scores for the six original research programmes were good or excellent and meet the requirements for a research environment for a Research Master's program (a score of 4.0 or higher according to the SEP protocol), with average scores ranging from 4.0 to 4.6 and with all scores for quality, productivity, relevance and viability at least 4.0.

All programmes of the FSS, including the research master, have their own Programme Committee. In the Programme Committees, teachers and student members are equally represented.

The teaching staff is selected on the basis of their research reputation and teaching qualifications. The application document stated that they represent a selection of the best researchers from the Institute for Societal Resilience. The core teaching staff (listed in the application document) is at least associate professor, possesses at least Basic Teaching Qualification (in Dutch: BKO), and speaks English at a C1-level. Some of them, including the Programme Director, have the Senior Teaching Qualification (In Dutch: SKO) and/or have followed the Educational Leadership course. Working group teachers might also have a position at the level of assistant professors. In research terms, core teaching staff members have an H-index of at least 15 on Google Scholar, have written at least 20 peer-reviewed publications and are engaged in international collaborations. The team consists of several specialists in the field of social media and big data, computational methods, and experts in the field of small data.

The research master Societal Resilience is accessible to a diverse group of potential students with experience in the field of social sciences and/or social science methodology. Prospective students must have completed their previous Bachelor's degree programme with a GPA of at least 7.5 (Dutch grading system) or the international equivalent. As stated in the application document, students who have insufficient knowledge in the field of social sciences and/or social science methodology - but who are still eligible for admission - may, following admission, enter the bridging programme of the Graduate School of Social Sciences. Exceptions are possible for candidates whose profiles include secondary activities, societal involvement and/or entrepreneurship, that demonstrate a high level of motivation to participate in the research master Societal Resilience.

Considerations

Research learning environment

The organisation of research at the Institute of Societal Resilience around thematic groupings provides the students with an arena for the exchange of ideas and with opportunities to engage in academic debate, further enhancing the quality and level of their research training. The panel assessed the generic aspects of teaching and examination within the programme according to international standards, with regard to the quality of the academic research environment. In line with the requirements for a research environment for research master's programmes, the scores of the most recent assessments of the six research groups of the faculty were good or excellent. In the future, the faculty aims for a multidisciplinary evaluation of the Institute of Societal Resilience.

The research done at the Faculty of Social Sciences is well known all over the world, however, not necessarily on a multidisciplinary level as envisaged by the new research master's program. The panel learned that the overarching theme of societal resilience aims to facilitate multidisciplinary collaborations within the faculty. The panel recommends that the overarching theme of societal resilience is further elaborated as related to the four key themes, and that the relations between the four themes are made more explicit. The panel concludes that students of the programme are part of a community of researchers. The panel is positive about the research learning environment and considers it to be sufficient.

The curriculum design is also considered sufficient: students learn a lot and gain appropriate skills in the social sciences. The programme prepares students for a career in academia, as well as research positions outside of academia. The students with whom the panel spoke during the site-visit considered the combination of various disciplinary perspectives, the possibility of doing an academic internship and the multi-method approach of the programme to be attractive. The panel did, however, notice that students only have little room for electives. The panel would advise the programme to make the duration of the internship flexible in order to provide students with the possibility to follow elective courses.

The programme contains courses related to the intended learning outcomes. The panel considers most intended learning outcomes to be adequately translated into objectives of the curriculum. The panel did, however, notice that the programme's ambition of the integrated multidisciplinary and multi-method approach was not adequately translated into the curriculum description and its components (also see standard 1). A critical reflection on the use and application of data is also lacking.

The panel is positive about the amount of methodological and substantive courses and considers this to be well-balanced. However, the panel found several inconsistencies in the application file. For instance, according to the description of the curriculum components, students are expected to write a full research paper based on data that have been collected during the internship. However, the acquisition of data is not listed as a course objective for the internship.

As stated before, most intended learning outcomes are translated well into the programme, with the exception of the spectrum and mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. The programme aims for students to learn skills which combine qualitative and quantitative analyses. This claim appears in the intended learning outcomes, however, in the overview of the programme, there seems to be an emphasis on a narrow set of qualitative methods. When questioning both the programme management and the staff about this concern, the panel found that their elaboration lacked sufficient detail. Moreover, although the course "Advanced Methods 1: Quantitative Methods" was included in the assessment table provided on-site, this course had not been specified in the application file. Because this aspect is at the core of the programme philosophy, the imbalance between the mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods deserves further elaboration and explication. The panel appreciated the mentioned concept of team teaching. In this teams, the mix of qualitative and quantitative will supposedly be taught.

The panel has looked into the teacher manuals provided during the site visit and found these to be up to date and of an appropriate level. The panel appreciates the other teaching methods which the programme has described, especially the interdisciplinary team-teaching approach, small groups, with a focus on discussions, tutorials and practicals. The management showed that additional requirements have to be met by students enrolled in a

research master's programme when following in comparison with regular master's programmes.

Admission

According to the panel, the admission criteria and entering requirements are strict and the programme distinguishes enough between students who enter the programme, also related to the fact that there is no bachelor programme in societal resilience. However, the panel advises the programme to reformulate its admission requirements. Potential students should be able to demonstrate that they have knowledge and skills in the field of qualitative *or quantitative* research methods and knowledge and insight into theories of *social sciences*. The panel furthermore agrees with the programme management that reference letters are of little added value in the selection procedure. During the site visit, the panel noted that the programme strives for students' diversity. This means that students from various backgrounds can start the programme.

Staff

During the site visit, the panel was informed about the staff. The staff is highly qualified in research and the faculty management makes clear choices to attract good staff, this has been shown during the site visit. Most of the staff teaching in the curriculum have a strong international reputation. Senior researchers and professors are involved in teaching and the supervision of graduation trajectories. This bodes well for the academic standards in this research master that the students will encounter, while also affording students an opportunity to tap into the international research networks of staff members. The panel understood that the multi-method/multi-disciplinary approach is part of a major institutional overhaul. The overarching theme of societal resilience then functions as a vehicle to help the different research groups within the faculty in finding common ground and collaborate in research.

Initially, the panel was impressed about the fact that all courses would be co-taught by two lecturers, in order to achieve the intended integration of methods and substance. During the site visit, the panel learned that this was not the case for most courses, and that lecturers did not seem to be familiar with this concept during the site visit. The panel recommends simultaneous co-teaching wherever possible. Furthermore, although staff members have sufficient expertise in terms of subject matter and teaching qualifications to teach the curriculum, the panel is of the opinion that courses on co-teaching should be followed by all staff members. The management of the programme also needs to play a greater role in steering and enhancing the opportunities for synergies between staff members. The panel is confident that the infrastructure to implement this is available.

Programme extension

The intended Research master in Societal Resilience is a two-year master's programme of 120 EC. The panel was asked to advise on the duration of the programme because of the request for programme extension. The NVAO provided criteria that need to be fulfilled for a programme to be able to apply for an extended duration. These criteria are found in the NVAO Protocol for programme extension (8 October 2003).

In the opinion of the panel, the panel members did receive adequate information in the accreditation proposal according to the Protocol for programme extension. The Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam articulates its arguments regarding the course duration extension. The panel has reviewed the intended curriculum and concluded that the programme is very ambitious. In the view of the panel the programme equips students to a high international

standard. The panel confirms all the arguments given by the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam to extend the course duration: the multidisciplinary approach and the research specialization are a necessity considering the (international) developments and the demands from the (international) field for researchers in this domain. The panel concludes that the duration of 120 credits is the minimum that is needed for realizing such a programme. Based on this information regarding the course duration, the panel considers course duration of two years for the programme Research master in Societal Resilience justified.

To conclude, the panel is satisfied with the overall research learning environment, the curriculum design and the highly qualified teaching staff. Moreover, the research orientation in the programme is very clear and visible. That being said, the panel has found insufficient evidence that the programme has all the necessary elements in place to achieve its intended integration of methods and multi-disciplinary prospects for substantive research questions. 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. In addition, the imbalance between the mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods deserves further elaboration and explication. Therefore, the panel judges that the standard is partially met.

Conclusion

Partially meets the standard

4.3 Standard 3: Assessment

The programme has an adequate assessment system in place.

Findings

The research master Societal Resilience follows the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam's assessment policy as described in the Educational Quality Assurance Manual. In the assessment policy, the vision on the role of assessments in the programme is elaborated on and gives an overview of the quality assurance regarding assessment.

According to this assessment policy, each course has an examiner and one or more lecturers. The examiner is nominated by the Programme Director and appointed by the Examination Board. In the research master Societal Resilience the examiner is also the main teacher of the course. The examiner is responsible for the quality of the assessments. This means that the method of assessment covers the course learning objectives, that the content of the assessment corresponds to the course content and the overall distinctions awarded reflect the degree to which students master the objectives of the course.

As illustrated in the application documents, the programme uses combinations of different teaching and assessment methods in the courses. These combinations follow the principle of constructive alignment in the sense that they are the most appropriate ones for the course, by directly addressing the learning outcomes.

The thesis addresses a research question on a social science topic of the student's choice, fitting the ISR-context, and is developed under supervision of one VU teaching staff members on an individual basis. The thesis includes a thorough review of relevant literature, an explicit

theoretical framework, a well-justified research design and complete description of data and methods, a thorough analysis of the findings, and a balanced conclusion and discussion.

Most courses will involve a set of mostly formative assignments followed by a final larger end product, either in the form of a written examination, research report or essay. Students will have two opportunities within a year to submit the final end product and pass the course: at the end of the course and in the resit-period. In general, in case of non-graded coursework all coursework needs to be completed to the stated level before passing the course.

The final grade for the master thesis is based on the separate evaluations of two assessors of the quality of the thesis produced (95% of the grade) and the progress and independence of the student (5% of the grade). The supervisor and the second assessor complete assessment forms independently of each other, evaluating the introduction, theory, data and methods, description of results, discussion, progress and independence (for the supervisor only), style and consistency, and other conditions. Should the case arise that the first reader grades a thesis as a pass (a grade of 6 or higher) and second reader judges it to be insufficient (a grade of 5 or lower), or in the case where the grades differ by more than two points, the Examination Board appoints a third, independent, examiner.

The faculty has one Examination Board for all educational programs, including the research master. Hence, the research master will, just like the other programs, have its own sub-committee. The core committee advises and instructs programme directors on policy matters at the faculty level. Individual complaints and requests by students and teachers are either handled by the core committee or the sub-committee. The sub-committee also annually samples theses and exams, make judgments about their quality, and inform the Programme Director about them.

After the evaluation of the master thesis of a cohort, the programme director organizes a meeting with supervisors to discuss the application of the evaluation criteria for the master thesis. Actual evaluations are used as examples. This discussion facilitates the calibration of evaluation standards among supervisors. Moreover, the quality is also ensured by the annual random sampling of theses by the sub-committee of the Examination Board.

Considerations

There is an array of assessment methods used across the curriculum. The panel was positive about this. The assessment is visibly research oriented. Assessments are appropriately detailed for each part of the curriculum, they are related to the assessments forms and are well spread across the semesters. However, considering both the broad inflow of students and the broad scope of subjects offered in the programme, the panel expects there to be more written tests than now envisaged in which knowledge can be tested so that the programme and the Examination Board can guarantee and verify that each student achieves the desired level. Also, the panel expects that the students will receive personal feedback regarding the major writing assignments (i.e. the project proposal and the scientific paper).

According to the course description of "Writing a research proposal", students are expected to write a research proposal that can be submitted to a funding agency and makes a convincing case for funding. The panel considers this objective overly ambitious and not feasible. Similarly, in the course description of "Writing a scientific paper", the programme claims that the course covers the entire process of writing a scientific paper – from developing a promising research question to the final round of revision before acceptance for publication.

Again, the panel does not consider this objective to be realistic or feasible and advises the programme to reformulate this objective. Assessment of the graduation project emphasises the research process conducted by the student.

For the assessment process, the programme refers to the general assessment strategies in annex 8. There is, as of yet, no separate and independent form to evaluate the more specific substantive knowledge combined with advanced methodological skills for this research master's programme. According to the overview of teaching and assessment methods that was included in the application file, students only receive individual feedback for their Master Thesis and Peer Group Learning. This part is ungraded, although assessed with an extensive assessment rubric. It is technically possible that students graduate from this programme without having obtained the learning outcome of civic minded narrative. During the site visit, the programme management and examination committee commented that the overview in the application file is incorrect and that this is an omission that needs to be improved. The panel appreciated that and accepted this as potentially unavoidable. The panel learned that for nearly all courses individual feedback will be given to students. The panel wants to emphasize that this feedback should also be formally available on the student assessment form. Moreover, rubrics at this moment do not exist for all parts of the curriculum. The panel is confident that these will be developed in a sound manner and will be made available to students. This enhances the uniformity and transparency of assessments.

The panel has established that the Faculty of Social Sciences has an Examination Board which has reliable procedures and the necessary level of independence. Despite the fact that no full professor has been appointed in the Examination Board, the panel is certain that its members have sufficient authority over the people whom they should evaluate and therefore operate in an effective manner.

The panel concludes that the assessment methods presented in the course descriptions are relevant, diverse and developed in a sound manner. The assessment and exam regulations of the master's programme are clearly described in the Teaching and Examination Regulations. Two shortcomings, however, remain. Considering both the broad inflow of students and the broad scope of subjects offered in the programme, the panel expects there to be more written tests in which knowledge acquisition can be tested. Also, individual feedback should be provided to the major writing assignment. Therefore, the panel judges that the standard is partially met. The panel requires the programme to develop a balanced assessment plan which includes written tests (for example exams), in particular for the substantive courses, as well as individual feedback where appropriate.

Conclusion

Partially meets the standard

4.4 Conclusion

The panel judged the intended learning outcomes (Standard 1) as positive. The teaching learning environment (Standard 2) is well designed and the learning outcomes can be reached by the students. Standard 2 is partially met because elaboration of the multidisciplinary and multi-methods approach in the courses is needed to ensure that these elements are sufficiently embedded in the programme that aims to teach students particularly about these aspects of research. In addition, the imbalance between the mix of quantitative and qualitative

research methods deserves further elaboration and explication. The assessment (Standard 3) is sufficient, but the panel requires the programme to develop a more balanced assessment plan which includes written tests (for example exams), in particular for the substantive courses, as well as individual feedback. Therefore, the panel judged Standard 3 as partially met. The panel concluded that they are convinced of the quality of this research master in Societal Resilience, taking into account the two comments as described above. Given these considerations, the panel advises NVAO to take a conditionally positive decision regarding the quality of the proposed research master in Societal Resilience (research master) as offered by the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

The conditions that the programme has to meet are:

- 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. Furthermore, the programme needs to address the imbalance in the spectrum and mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods in the curriculum.
- 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.

These conditions should be met before the programme starts. Therefore the updated documents should be sent to the NVAO by 1 April 2019.

4.5 Recommendations

The panel has also made some recommendations, which are meant for further improvement of the quality of the programme.

- The panel suggests to improve the match between title and content.
- The panel recommends the intended integration of the substantive multidisciplinary and multi-method approach to be made more explicit in the learning outcomes.
- The panel recommends a further elaboration of the overarching concept of societal resilience as related to the four key topic areas.
- The panel would advise the programme to make the duration of the internship flexible in order to provide students with the possibility to follow elective courses.
- The panel recommends simultaneous co-teaching wherever possible.
- The panel advises the programme to reformulate its admission requirements. Potential students should be able to demonstrate that they have knowledge and skills in the field of qualitative or *quantitative* research methods and knowledge and insight into theories of *social sciences*.
- Some of the objectives of the courses “Writing a scientific paper” and “Writing a research proposal” are not considered feasible or realistic. The panel advises the programme to reformulate these objectives (see standard 3).

5 Overview of the Assessments

STANDARD	ASSESSMENT
<p>1 Intended learning outcomes The intended learning outcomes of the programme have been concretised with regard to content, level and orientation; they meet international requirements.</p>	Meets the standard
<p>2 Teaching-learning environment The curriculum, staff and programme-specific services and facilities enable incoming students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.</p>	Partially meets the standard
<p>3 Assessment The programme has an adequate assessment system in place.</p>	Partially meets the standard
<p>CONCLUSION</p>	<p>Conditionally positive</p>

Annex 1 – Composition of the panel

Prof. dr. Judi Mesman, Professor of Interdisciplinary Study of Societal Challenges, Leiden University, Netherlands (chair)

Judi Mesman is professor of The interdisciplinary study of societal challenges, and *dean* of Leiden University College. Her research focuses on the role of gender and culture in parenting and its influence on how children view themselves, others, and the wider world around them. Mesman has acquired more than 8 million euros in competitive research grants, published over 80 international peer-reviewed papers (> 5,000 citations, H-index 31), is an active PhD supervisor (16 completed, 20 ongoing) and won two teaching prizes. She is elected member of the Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Royal Dutch Society of Sciences.

Prof. dr. Peer Scheepers, Professor of Comparative Research Methodology and Vice-Dean of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences, Radboud University Nijmegen, Netherlands

Peer Scheepers is a professor of comparative methodology at Radboud University. His focus is on cross-national and longitudinal research regarding issues of social cohesion on which he has published widely in high ranking international journals (in sociology, political science, communication science and medical science; H-index=48, > 9,000 citations). He has guided > 30 PhD candidates to successfully defend their PhD theses. He is also vice-dean in the Faculty of Social Sciences, elected member of the Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences, elected member of Academia Europaea and Knight in the Order of the Dutch Lion. He has served on a number of NVAO and QANU evaluation committees.

Prof. dr. Michaela Maier, Professor in Applied Communication Science, University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany

Michaela Maier is professor of applied communication psychology at the University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany. Her research focuses on the effects of a) political communication and b) science communication. In both fields she has been involved in the management of interdisciplinary research groups with external funding, e.g. the Special Priority Programme “Science and the Public” of the German Research Foundation. She has published in international journals in communication science, political science and psychology and has been vice-dean and dean in the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Koblenz-Landau as well as member of the University Council.

Lennart van Doremalen MSc, PhD candidate in Subatomic Physics, Utrecht University, Netherlands (student member). (student member)

Lennart van Doremalen is a PhD candidate at the institute of Subatomic Physics at Utrecht University. He studied the research master ‘Experimental Physics’ and the bachelor ‘Physics and Astronomy’ at the same university. During his studies, he was co-founder of the student party Lijst Helder and student representative for this party in UU’s University Council. From 2009 until 2010, he was the student board member of the Department of Physics. In 2012, he organised the International Conference of Physics Students (ICPS) in collaboration with fellow students. In addition, Lennart was an active member of the national student union LSVb, the local student union VIDUIS, and fulfilled several functions as board member or advisor next to his studies. He is also co-founder of the Utrecht municipality council party Student & Starter.

Assisting staff

- **Astrid Koster MSc, secretary (certified);**
- **Aurelie van 't Slot, MA, NVAO policy advisor and process coordinator.**
- **Thomas de Bruijn, PhD, NVAO policy advisor was as an observer present at the site visit**

All panel members and the secretary signed a declaration of independence and confidentiality prior to the peer review.

Annex 2 – Schedule of the site visit

Site visit Research Master Societal Resilience took place on 20 April 2018

Location: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, Forumzaal 6

08.30-09.00	Arrival of panel at VU and internal panel meeting	
09.00-09.30	Session 1: representatives faculty board	- Prof. dr. Jacquélien van Stekelenburg, Teaching portfolioholder Prof. dr. Karen van Oudenhoven, Dean
09.35-10.20	Session 2: representatives programme management opleidingsmanagement	- Prof. dr. René Bekkers, Programme director - Dr. Naná de Graaff, Programme coordinator
10.20-10.35	Break	
10.35-11.20	Session 3: representatives lectures	- Dr. Tilo Hartmann, Lecturer - Prof. dr. Peter Kerkhof, Lecturer - Dr. Gerhard van de Bunt, Examination board
11.25-12.00	Session 4: representatives examination board and programme Committee	- Dr. Camiel Beukeboom, Programme committee - Dr. mr. André van Montfort, examination board (chair) - Dr. Frans Kamsteeg, Examination board - Dr. Gerhard van de Bunt, Examination board
12.00-12.45	Internal meeting panel + lunch	
12.45-13.15	Session 5: representatives students	- Karin Kee, BSc, FSS Master student - Demi Leakat, FSS Bachelor student
13.20-13.50	Session 6: representatives professional field	- Prof. dr. Hans Boutellier Verwey-Jonker Institute / VU - Prof. dr. Gerard van der Steenhoven KNMI / UT - Prof. dr. Tineke Fokkema NIDI / EUR
13.50-14.00	Break	
14.00-14.15	Session 7: second conversation representatives programme management	
14.15-15.30	Internal meeting panel	
15.30-15.45	Feedback on key panel findings	

Annex 3 – Documents reviewed

Documents presented by the institution

- Application file (December 2017)

Documents available at the site visit

- Schedule and delegation list;
- Competence matrix;
- Overview Organizational arrangements of the Research Master Societal Resilience;
- Programme overview staff (including H-index);
- Course manual of the course Foundations of Societal Resilience;
- Course manual of the course Peer group learning;
- Course manual of the course Dynamics of Interconnectedness (including examples of written papers);
- Course manual of the course Big data, small data;
- Assessment plan;
- Organizational arrangements;
- Brochure Research Master Societal Resilience;
- Literature.

Annex 4 – List of abbreviations

ba	bachelor
CROHO	Central Register of Higher Education Study Programmes
EC	European Credits
fte	full-time equivalent
ILOs	intended learning outcomes
ma	master
MSc	Master of Science
NVAO	Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie / Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders
TER	Teaching and Examination Regulations (in Dutch: OER)
wo	wetenschappelijk onderwijs / academic education

The advisory report was written on behalf of the NVAO for the limited initial accreditation of the Research Master in Societal Resilience offered by Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

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