

**Master Humanities (research)  
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam**

*Report of the limited programme assessment  
11 November 2021*

## Colophon

### Master Humanities (Research)

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Research Master

Location: Amsterdam

Mode of study: fulltime

Croho: 60958

Result of institutional assessment: positive, 14 June 2016

### Panel

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The panel was presented to the NVAO for approval.

The assessment was conducted under responsibility of

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*This document is best printed in duplex*

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## Summary

On 11 November 2021 an assessment committee of AeQui visited the Research Master programme Humanities at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU). The RMA Humanities results from a merger of separate disciplinary RMA's. It was offered for the first time in 2017-2018 and combines disciplinary components with interdisciplinary elements along two cross-cutting topics: digital and environmental humanities. For its assessment the committee has used the 2018 framework for limited programme assessment, as well as the additional criteria for research master's programmes (2016). The committee judges that the programme meets each standard; hence the panel considers that the overall quality of the programme is **positive**.

### Intended learning outcomes

The RMA Humanities evolved from a range of individual disciplinary RMA's into one programme, which has interdisciplinarity at its heart and does justice to its disciplinary legacies through the tracks and specialisations. In its current format, the programme strikes a nice balance between disciplinary formation and interdisciplinarity. While its interdisciplinary character definitely is an asset, the programme has not yet reached the full potential of this distinctive feature. The intended learning outcomes reflect not only the domain, level and orientation of the programme, but also do justice to the profile and objectives of this particular RMA Humanities: focused on research in Humanities, offering a unique combination of disciplinary and interdisciplinary training with explicit attention to both the international and societal dimension of research. The programme does very well in communicating to students that the advanced research competencies they acquire can be used for a research career both inside and outside academia. The committee judges that the RMA Humanities **meets** this standard.

### Teaching-learning environment

The RMA Humanities has created a dynamic learning environment featuring a strong and relevant curriculum, excellent research staff and a safe atmosphere for students to pursue their educational interests. The programme structure is complex but internally consistent. The efforts to continuously adjust and optimise the balance between disciplinary and interdisciplinary courses, for instance by developing the Environmental Humanities option to a full track, are to be encouraged. Students have ample flexibility to tailor their individual study plans, while the programme oversees that in all cases the set of courses and their respective learning goals cover the

overall learning outcomes. Students are invariably qualified for this programme as the admission requirements are clear and relevant. They also bring a variety of backgrounds which the programme uses in implementing the educational principle of the International Classroom. The track record of the lecturers and the external research assessments demonstrate that the RMA Humanities is founded upon high quality research expertise of teaching staff, who also possess didactic skills and are proficient in English. Students are exposed to the different parts of the entire research cycle and immersed in the ongoing research of the lecturers, supervisors and research departments. They are not only taught general research skills but also learn about research ethics and reflect on research practices in view of ethical standards. While the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting on the quality of education and the well-being of both students and staff, the programme is mitigating the crisis among others by developing alternative forms of education which they will continue to offer afterwards. The short- and medium-term ambitions of the programme are very appealing. In order to maintain a similar level of quality in the future, it is important that the RMA Humanities increases its staff capacity, develops a selection procedure, supports the creation of student cohorts, communicates more/regularly the opportunities the curriculum offers to students, and reinvigorates the feedback mechanisms between students, staff and programme. The committee judges that the RMA Humanities **meets** this standard.

### Student assessment

Assessment at the RMA Humanities is organised very well. The assessment system is embedded in the policies and frameworks of both Faculty and University, and the assessment of individual courses

takes place in a transparent way. Several assessment principles are good practice: lecturers take a central role in the quality of their assessments and support each other through review and feedback; the Programme Director produces the assessment plan, which ensures assessment is at all times on the mind of the management; and assessment materials are collected and archived systematically in dedicated course assessment files. The Examination Board and Assessment Chamber have important tasks in assuring the quality of assessment across the Faculty and for the RMA Humanities, and fulfil their roles in a professional and dedicated way. The completion of the thesis assessment forms requires attention: while the dedicated form is appropriate and some assessors complete it in an exemplary way, there is room for better quality and more consistent feedback. The committee judges that the RMA Humanities **meets** this standard.

#### Achieved learning outcomes

Students who graduate from the RMA Humanities programme have the necessary competencies to move on in their career. The results of the thesis review demonstrate that graduates achieve all general and track-specific learning outcomes. Moreover, alumni end up in a wide variety of interesting positions which are commensurate with the domain, level and orientation of the RMA programme. Since

the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the findings on the achieved learning outcomes confirm that the programme is doing a good job. The committee judges that the RMA Humanities **meets** this standard.

#### Recommendations

The assessment committee has issued a positive judgement on each standard and on the quality of the RMA Humanities programme as a whole. Nonetheless it sees room for improvement in a number of areas. The committee issues the following recommendations:

- to facilitate the production of individual study plans by communicating even more and more regularly on the various opportunities of the RMA curriculum;
- to develop a procedure that selects the most relevant students among a growing number of properly qualified applicants;
- to support students directly and indirectly in building an RMA Humanities cohort;
- to increase the number of programme staff ensuring that there is enough capacity to meet both the current and the future ambitions of the programme;
- to appoint a dedicated thesis coordinator to address the flaws established during the thesis review on the quality and consistency of the feedback.

All standards of the NVAO assessment framework (2018) as well as the additional criteria for research master's programmes are assessed positively; the assessment committee therefore issues a **positive** recommendation for the accreditation of the programme.

On behalf of the entire assessment committee,  
Utrecht, January 2022

Jan Baetens  
Chair

Mark Delmartino  
Secretary

## Introduction

The Research Master Humanities is a two-year full-time programme of 120 EC. It attracts students with a variety of backgrounds to one of the following tracks: Philosophy, Global History, Critical Studies in Art and Culture, Literature and Contested Spaces, and Linguistics, with specialisations Human Language Technology and Forensic Linguistics. The multi- and interdisciplinary programme is taught by research staff from three departments in the Faculty of Humanities and currently attracts about 30 national and international students per year. The RMA Humanities has been, is and continues to be adjusted and finetuned; the structure of the programme tracks are further harmonised and the cross-cutting theme of environmental humanities becomes a separate track, which is likely to attract more students to the RMA programme.

### The institute

The Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam was founded in 1880 as a Protestant Christian university. Since its foundation, VU has stood for scientific and value-driven education, research and knowledge transfer. Its basic philosophy is expressed in three core values: responsible, open, and personally engaged. Currently the VU consists of 10 Faculties and features around 30000 students and 4000 staff. The Faculty of Humanities was created in 2014 as a merger between the Faculties of Philosophy and Arts and counts three departments: Art & Culture, History, Antiquity; Language, Literature and Communication; and Philosophy. The Research Master (RMA) programme Humanities is organised by the Graduate School of Humanities, while the staff teaching in the programme is linked to one of the three departments.

### The programme

The RMA Humanities is the result of the merger of separate disciplinary RMA's in 2017. It now consists of five tracks / six specialisations: Philosophy, Global History, Critical Studies in Art and Culture, Literature and Contested Spaces, and Linguistics, with specialisations Human Language Technology and Forensic Linguistics. Students apply and register for one of the tracks; once accepted they either follow the pre-set discipline-specific curriculum or compose a tailor-made programme focusing on one of the cross-cutting themes: Digital Humanities and Environmental Humanities.

The RMA Humanities has a dedicated programme director who is assisted by six track coordinators. The RMA has its own Programme Committee with staff from all departments and students from each of the tracks. The quality of assessment is assured by a faculty-wide Examination Board and its Assessment Chamber.

The previous external assessment in 2015 still focused on the individual RMA programmes. In its positive - advice the committee advocated for more interdisciplinarity and expressed concern about the viability of the respective programmes. The creation of the new RMA is in part a response to those recommendations. The RMA Humanities was assessed internally during a mid-term review in 2018, and enhanced the programme coherence as well as its interdisciplinary character following this review.

At the time of the actual external assessment visit, the programme is envisaging new adjustments: in 2022-2023, the curriculum components of the different study tracks will be further harmonised, and the number of common core courses will be increased. There are also plans to organise the RMA Humanities along three disciplinary and three interdisciplinary tracks at the intersection between pairs of departments. In this regard, the programme hopes to attract more students by turning the current cross-cutting theme Environmental Humanities into a fully-fledged track.

In order to draw well-founded conclusions on this RMA programme, the assessment committee has looked at the quality of the programme in the recent past (through the thesis review), at the performance of the RMA Humanities in the current academic year 2021-2022, and at the programme plans for the immediate future.

### **The assessment**

VU Amsterdam assigned AeQui Nederland to perform a quality assessment of its RMA Humanities. In close co-operation with the programme management, AeQui convened an independent and competent assessment committee. The committee members are shortly presented in attachment 1. A preparatory meeting with representatives of the programme was held to exchange information and plan the date and programme of the site-visit.

In the run-up to the site visit, the committee studied the programme's self-evaluation report and reviewed a sample of theses accepted during the last two years. The first impressions on the programme based on this report and the thesis review were input for discussion among the committee members in their online preparatory meeting on 8 November 2021, as well as during the visit.

The site visit was carried out on 11 November 2021 according to the schedule presented in attachment 2. The committee has assessed the programme in an independent manner; at the end of

the visit, the chair of the assessment committee presented the initial findings of the committee to representatives of the programme and the institution. The visit also featured an open consultation hour for RMA Humanities students, teaching and support staff; eventually one person used the opportunity to speak individually and confidentially with the committee.

The committee performed its assessment in relation to, and in consideration of, the cluster of programmes in which this programme is placed. The contextualisation of the programme within its cluster was conducted by the complete committee during the preliminary meeting and the final deliberations. The knowledge required for this was present in (part of) the committee.

In the underlying document, the committee is reporting on its findings, considerations and conclusions according to the NVAO framework for limited programme assessment. The report also takes into account the additional criteria for research master's programmes formulated in the NVAO publication dated May 2016. A draft version of the report was sent to the programme management; its reactions have led to this final version of the report.

Initiated by the programme, a development dialogue will be planned early 2022. The results of this development dialogue have no influence on the assessment presented in this report.

## 1. Intended learning outcomes

The RMA Humanities evolved from a range of individual disciplinary RMA's into one programme, which has interdisciplinarity at its heart. While this interdisciplinary character is definitely an asset, the programme has not yet reached its full potential. The intended learning outcomes reflect the domain, level and orientation of the programme, and also do justice to the profile and objectives of this particular RMA Humanities: a focused on research in Humanities, a unique combination of disciplinary and interdisciplinary training, and explicit attention to both the international and the societal dimension of research. The RMA programme communicates very well to students that the advanced research competencies they acquire can be used for a research career both inside and outside academia. According to the assessment committee, the RMA programme Humanities **meets this standard**.

### Findings

#### *Profile*

Based on the written materials and the discussions on site, the assessment committee understood that by now the RMA Humanities is a truly self-standing programme with its own profile and objectives and a set of tracks/specialisations. Starting from different disciplinary RMA programmes that were merged into one single Humanities RMA, the institutional and programme management – together with track coordinators and lecturers – designed a new RMA programme that takes on board the disciplinary components of the previous programmes and combines this with interdisciplinary elements. In fact, the disciplinary programmes live on as individual tracks in the RMA Humanities, while the interdisciplinary dimension is promoted through two cross-cutting themes that according to the committee are well chosen and highly relevant: Environmental Humanities and Digital Humanities.

The committee thinks the approach of the RMA Humanities to combine two perspectives into one single programme is not only original, but has also been done successfully. While interdisciplinarity is at the heart of the RMA programme, disciplinary training is not abandoned, on the contrary: interdisciplinarity is seen as an added value to a thorough disciplinary formation.

According to the self-evaluation report, the RMA Humanities prepares students for a career in research within or outside academia. It is the explicit ambition of the programme to train researchers who are specialists in their own academic field and are also willing and able to collaborate with other experts, in an international context and/or with parties outside academia. Students who have completed this degree should be able to successfully apply for research positions and should be capable of setting up research projects that respond to the needs of society at large. The committee agrees to these objectives, and welcomes in particular the programme's emphasis on social relevance. It noticed with satisfaction during the discussions on site that the programme goes at lengths to inform students that the training they receive can be used not only to pursue a PhD but also in settings outside academia that require advanced research competencies.

Furthermore, the committee found that the interdisciplinary, international and societal dimensions of the RMA Humanities programme align well with the goals of the VU. The university is characterised by a diverse student population, a multidisciplinary research focus and a strong societal orientation; RMA students are trained to combine in-depth professional expertise with a broad multidisciplinary view in order to solve complex societal issues. According to the committee, this societal horizon is also very much present in the RMA



programme. In line with VU's internationalisation strategy, the RMA Humanities features international mobility as well as community building through international classrooms. Moreover, the cross-cutting themes Environmental Humanities and Digital Humanities embody two of the current profile themes of the university: Science for Sustainability and Connected World.

The committee understood from the materials and the discussions that the programme can rely on a dedicated Professional Advisory Board. This work field committee consists of (potential) employers, as well as alumni and academics. The committee noticed that altogether the Advisory Board members cover a broad range of disciplinary domains and career opportunities at private and public, academic and non-academic institutions. Over the years, the Advisory Board provided input to the programme developers when adjustments were due to the profile, objectives and curriculum of the programme. For example, the programme was guided by the Board's advice that employers do not only value strong disciplinary expertise but also look for graduates with open and flexible minds who are able to collaborate in a team. The committee welcomes the involvement of the Professional Advisory Board and encourages the programme to continue searching for the Board's advice in the future.

Students provided input to the self-evaluation report through their own Student Chapter, which the committee found was an independent and well-balanced assessment of the programme's current performance. In their chapter students indicated that interdisciplinarity is an important aspect of the RMA Humanities that is however not yet fully realised. Students understand that such courses are challenging to design and teach. And while these courses certainly have the potential to become a valuable part of the programme, they are not yet developed to a level that reflects the strong ambitions of the programme. The committee heard similar remarks during the site visit: disciplinary and interdisciplinary components are vying for space, students with different disciplinary

backgrounds are encouraged / obliged to work together but do not always see the added value or the interdisciplinary purpose of the course assignment, and students with a background outside Humanities are often called upon to contribute their own previously existing expertise in group work (e.g. programming) instead of acquiring interdisciplinary insights. The committee noticed during the discussions that these appreciations differ very much according to the individual student: some chose the programme for its interdisciplinary character, others come to appreciate this dimension during their time at VU and still others enrolled on the programme with outspoken disciplinary ambitions and now come to realise that the interdisciplinary component is quite considerable and not yet developed to the extent that it provides much value added for their plans. Overall, however, the committee established that students appreciate the programme and find its ambitions and goals attractive.

#### *Learning outcomes*

The RMA Humanities features ten intended learning outcomes (ILOs): nine of these ILOs should be demonstrated by all students; one ILO is track-specific and describes the specialist disciplinary knowledge RMA students of that particular track should have acquired by the time they graduate. The committee found the ILOs well-chosen and appropriate for the goals of the RMA Humanities. It also noticed with satisfaction that there is a clear connection between the learning outcomes and the Dublin Descriptors: each of the five Descriptors are covered in at least two learning outcomes. According to the committee, the ILOs are formulated in such a way that they cover the domain (humanities and its disciplinary tracks), the level (master) and the orientation (academic) of the programme.

Furthermore, the committee established that the specific research-oriented nature of a RMA programme is visible in the formulated ILOs: there is reference in several learning outcomes to building up in-depth methodological expertise and knowledge, to transferable research skills, and to

knowledge utilization and funding. It is obvious from this set of ILOs that the programme prepares for a research career. The committee welcomes in this regard the recent update of one ILO to include explicit reference to careers outside academia. Hence, the committee confirms that ILOs are formulated in such a way that they do justice to the research master level of the programme.

### Considerations

The committee has gained a good understanding of the origins of the RMA Humanities and of the path the programme has followed to evolve from a range of individual disciplinary research master programmes into the current single programme. According to the committee, the RMA Humanities has interdisciplinarity at its heart and does justice to its disciplinary legacies through the tracks and specialisations. It has successfully made the transition and found an excellent balance between disciplinary formation and interdisciplinarity.

The committee considers that the RMA Humanities prepares students for a career in research. It welcomes the attention of the programme to communicate to students that the training they receive can be used not only to pursue a PhD but also in settings outside academia that require advanced research competencies.

The committee endorses the viewpoint of the students that the interdisciplinary character of the programme is a distinctive feature, which is however not yet fully realised. In order to reach the full potential of its interdisciplinary approach, the programme needs to reflect on, and possibly adjust, the contents and the formats of some of its core course components. Discussing the future outlook of the RMA Humanities, the committee is confident that the programme will realise its full interdisciplinary potential soon.

Finally, the committee considers that the intended learning outcomes reflect not only the domain, level and orientation of the programme, but also do justice to the profile and objectives of this particular RMA Humanities. According to the committee, the ILOs are formulated in such a way that students can aspire a research career within and outside academia through a unique combination of disciplinary and interdisciplinary training with explicit attention to the programme's international and societal dimension of research.

Based on the interviews and examination of the underlying documentation, the assessment committee concludes that the RMA programme Humanities **meets standard 1, intended learning outcomes.**

## 2. Teaching-learning environment

The RMA Humanities has created a dynamic learning environment featuring a strong and relevant curriculum, excellent research staff and a safe atmosphere for students to pursue their educational interests. The programme structure is complex but internally consistent. Students have ample flexibility to tailor their individual study plans, while the programme oversees that in all cases the set of courses and their respective learning goals cover the overall learning outcomes. Students are invariably qualified for this programme as the admission requirements are clear and relevant. They also bring a variety of backgrounds which the programme uses in implementing the educational principle of the International Classroom. The track record of the lecturers and the external research assessments demonstrate that the RMA Humanities is founded upon high quality research expertise of teaching staff, who also possess didactic skills and are proficient in English. While the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting on the quality of education and the well-being of both students and staff, the programme is mitigating the crisis among others by developing alternative forms of education which they will continue to offer afterwards. The short- and medium-term ambitions of the programme are very appealing. In order to maintain a similar level of quality in the future, it is important that the RMA Humanities increases its staff capacity, develops a selection procedure, supports the creation of student cohorts, communicates more/regularly the opportunities the curriculum offers to students, and reinvigorates the feedback mechanisms between students, staff and programme. According to the assessment committee, the RMA programme Humanities **meets this standard**.

### Findings

#### *Programme*

The RMA Humanities amounts to 120 EC and is offered as a full-time two-year programme.

The curriculum consists of core courses common to all RMA students, mandatory courses that are specific to each of the five tracks / six specialisations, courses at national research schools, electives (including a possible internship or stay abroad) and a thesis. In the academic year 2021-2022, there are three core courses (18 EC): Methodologies, Environmental Humanities or Digital Humanities, and career preparation. The number and study load of the track-specific compulsory courses differ considerably, ranging from 18 EC to 42 EC. Students complement their individual study plan with mandatory courses from other tracks and/or take the other cross-cutting core course; as of September 2022 all tracks will offer between 27 and 30 EC of specific mandatory courses. Furthermore, students sign up with a relevant national research school to follow at least 10 EC of courses which can be spread over two years. Electives that do not necessarily relate to the track/specialization amount to maximum 30

EC and can be taken through (a combination of) courses, internship and study abroad. RMA students can attend regular MA courses; in these cases, RMA students are expected to write a more extensive and more intricate assignment. The specific terms of this additional task are always mentioned in the study guide. Finally, the RMA thesis counts for 30 EC.

Based on the written materials and the discussions on site, the committee established on the one hand that the programme structure is complex; on the other hand the building blocks allow all tracks to offer an internally consistent range of courses. Students can tailor the study plan to their own needs and interests. The learning goals of the respective common and track-specific courses align with the overall learning outcomes and ensure that by the end of the programme students have indeed had the opportunity to demonstrate all intended learning outcomes.

During the site visit, the organization of the curriculum, its core courses and the plans for the fu-

ture have been discussed at length. Every semester has a focus: starting with the disciplinary track/specialisation, over the interdisciplinary common core and the electives, and ending with the thesis. The committee understands the rationale for starting the programme with track-specific courses and bringing all students together in the second semester. While enrolling for the programme, students sign up – and are admitted to / selected for – a track; moreover, the RMA Humanities allows strong students from the regular master programmes in Humanities to join the RMA after one semester.

The committee is enthusiastic about the courses on offer: it welcomes the attention to the environmental and digital dimensions of humanities and the way these courses are organised. Furthermore, it appreciates the professional career course, where students can opt for an in-depth preparation as researcher, develop their skills as entrepreneur or do a project on community service learning. Students indicated that all three options offer a relevant introduction into a professional career path.

Currently, the Methodologies course is the only programme component where all RMA Humanities students are together. It offers an overview and critical discussion of methods that are applied in the humanities, and expects students from different tracks to work together on a problem-oriented interdisciplinary research project. The committee understood from the materials and the discussions that the course is constantly updated and adjusted to reflect student feedback. While many students appreciate the set-up of the course, others do not like it at all. According to the committee, this course should become the signature component of the programme as it is the first (and only) moment during the programme that brings together all students. Hence the suggestion to leave out all elements that students will anyway pick up in other courses and to focus on a truly multi- / inter- / cross-disciplinary state-of-play in Humanities research.

Furthermore, the committee endorses the intention of the programme to harmonise the size of the track-specific courses as of next academic year and to enlarge the common core courses up to 24 EC in the near future. It also thinks highly of the plans for a new track around Environmental Humanities which is currently under construction. Content-wise this track looks very appealing and may attract a great interest, also from students who would otherwise not consider applying for the RMA Humanities. In order to accommodate this influx, the programme should increase its human resource capacity. Moreover, the committee advises the programme management to monitor that this new track will not cannibalise some of the other tracks.

One of the key elements of the RMA Humanities programme is its flexibility; through their individual study plan, students can tailor the programme to their own individual needs and interests. Students indicated both in the student chapter and in the discussions on site that they very much like this flexibility, which seems to work well for a majority of students. However, the flexibility also constitutes a weakness when students cannot find their own niche or have difficulties in balancing their disciplinary background with the interdisciplinary offer. Moreover, students who are not familiar with the Netherlands and/or the Dutch higher education system often find it difficult to optimise their own study plan and sometimes miss out on opportunities outside VU that are feasible in the framework of the programme but not always conceivable for foreign students. While acknowledging the efforts of the track coordinators to ensure that eventually all students have an attractive individual study plan, the committee also endorses the students' plea for more (and repeated) communication on the curriculum opportunities in order for all students to create a well-rounded and focused programme.

#### *Language*

The title of the RMA is in English and so is the language of instruction. It is an explicit decision

of the university, faculty and programme management to conduct all courses and activities in English. Almost half of the students are international; Dutch students from their side have the opportunity to develop their oral and written communication skills in English, which is worldwide the main language for research. The committee understands and endorses the argumentation to offer the programme in English. Moreover, it noticed that both students and lecturers on the programme are (more than) sufficiently proficient in English.

The discussions on site did however reveal that international students who wish to learn Dutch have only limited opportunities to do so at an affordable cost. While it understands that this is not an issue that can be solved at the level of the RMA programme, the committee does think that it is an important element for the integration of international students, who may want to do an internship or have longer-term career plans in the Netherlands.

#### *Research*

The staff involved in the RMA programme are all active researchers who belong to one of three departments in the Humanities Faculty. Both lecturers and students indicated that the education provided is very research-based, with plenty of references to the ongoing research of the individual professors. During the courses, students are not only taught general research skills such as experimental methods, but also learn about research ethics and reflect on research practices in view of ethical standards. Moreover, students have the opportunity to participate in ongoing research of the research centres at the Faculty, connect with the PhD students during graduate seminars, and build a network with researchers in the National Research School of their choice. The committee has looked into the external research assessments of the three research centres Philosophy; Language, Communication and Cognition; and CLUE+. The three very positive reviews demonstrate according to the committee the real

foundation of the RMA programme: strong research. Throughout the curriculum students are exposed to and involved in the different parts of the entire research cycle. The way students are immersed in ongoing research is clearly an added value.

#### *Admission*

The RMA Humanities programme is now attracting more students (29 in 2020/21) than the sum of students who were enrolled before in the respective disciplinary RMA's (18 in 2016/17). The committee noticed that the programme has clear admission requirements: students who obtained a bachelor degree in one of the Humanities disciplines or an interdisciplinary degree (such as Liberal Arts and Sciences) in the Netherlands or abroad can be admitted, provided their grade average is 7.5 on those components that are relevant for the RMA programme, including a bachelor thesis of at least 7.5. Students from the regular MA programme who join the second semester of the RMA Humanities should fulfil the same conditions.

Students apply for a particular track, which may have specific requirements regarding the minimum number of credits for a specific discipline. The track coordinators check the applications and decide on admission. Until now, all students who satisfied the formal requirements were accepted. If the number of eligible applicants grows considerably, the programme will have to install a selection procedure. The committee advises the management to prepare such procedure in order to handle the expected high number of additional applications for the envisaged track on Environmental Humanities.

#### *Students*

The programme attracts students with different educational, cultural and geographical backgrounds: about half of the RMA students are international. This mixture of backgrounds is used by the programme and the different course leaders to implement the university vision of an International Classroom. The committee welcomes

this approach, which it finds particularly suitable because it allows to integrate different viewpoints and aligns with the interdisciplinary dimension of the programme.

The committee noticed from the materials and the discussions that students are increasingly satisfied with the programme. The worries they expressed in previous evaluations on communication and career preparation have been addressed. Furthermore, the committee appreciates the open atmosphere in the programme and the safe space it creates for students to develop their interests and provide feedback on the quality of the programme components.

Following the discussions with students and alumni who confirmed these positive findings, two elements require the attention of the programme management, according to the committee: first, students have the feeling that they are responsible for creating a feeling of togetherness as the programme does not work towards creating a cohort and is not very supportive for such initiatives. The students – and the committee – understand that the COVID-19 pandemic has not been conducive to community building, but there is definitely room for more informal get togethers and team building initiatives across the tracks.

Secondly, students indicated that the principle of feedback is not always implemented as it should be. While the programme (management) definitely invites students for feedback, this is not always the case in every course with some lecturers taking this very seriously inviting students for direct feedback during class time and others hardly addressing the issue. Moreover, it seems that the Programme Committee has not been functioning well since the lockdown in March 2020. According to the students, several teaching staff representing the departments have either not been appointed/confirmed or did not attend the meetings due to an overload of work. The committee has addressed the issue with the management and is confident that the Programme Committee will be revived soon. According to the committee,

this is all the more important given that it brings together students and staff representing all tracks and all departments.

The committee has looked at the available figures on drop-out, success rate and average study duration. In most cases there are only relevant data on student cohorts enrolled on the predecessor programmes. Nonetheless, the very first figures seem to indicate that the RMA Humanities programme is doing better in terms of students graduating in time. According to the programme completion and delay rates were in line with similar RMA programmes at other universities in the Netherlands. Moreover, there are always students who decide to leave the programme without graduating; given the small size of the RMA programme at VU, one student more or less leaving the programme will considerably affect the drop-out rate.

#### *Staff*

According to the self-evaluation report, the ambitions of the RMA programme also manifest themselves through the background and expertise of the faculty members involved. The committee fully agrees to this statement. Looking at the CV's of individual lecturers, it noticed their excellent quality as researchers and teachers. The discussions moreover showed their great enthusiasm for the programme and commitment to the students. Students from their side emphasized in their report chapter and during the discussions the strength of the teaching staff: the quality of instruction is consistently high.

The committee was informed that all lecturers have their disciplinary expertise and increasingly obtain grants for interdisciplinary research projects. In this way they ground the students in their respective disciplines while providing a broader education and engaging with progressive issues and cutting edge research.

It is faculty policy to consider the quality of the lecturers as the basis for assuring the quality of

education. Hence, all lecturers on the RMA Humanities programme are expected to not only have a PhD but also to possess a (senior) university teaching qualification, assessment expertise and a certified command of English language proficiency at level C1. Moreover, several lecturers have followed the university-wide Educational leadership programme. The committee welcomes this focus on the (certified / monitored) quality of the lecturers.

The committee did notice, however, that the workload of the staff is considerable and that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased this workload even more. While the number of staff seems sufficient to deliver the RMA courses on offer, discussions with students and staff indicate that the combination of research, education and management/valorisation tasks of the staff does not allow lecturers anymore to dedicate the time they deem necessary / useful to the RMA programme. Hence the invitation from the committee to ensure that the level of staffing is commensurate with the complete range of tasks staff is expected to fulfil in the programme. This call for more capacity is all the more urgent in view of the envisaged changes in the programme and the likelihood of the RMA Humanities attracting (many) more students in the Environmental Humanities track.

#### *COVID-19*

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the programme, its students and lecturers. The committee learned that almost all education activities moved online in March 2020. Students and staff indicated that this has affected not only the quality of the education but also the learning pleasure of students. As mentioned before, the pandemic has had an effect on the delivery and perceived quality of the Methodologies course, on the limited functioning of the Programme Committee and on the workload of teaching staff.

The committee understood from the materials and the discussions on site that overall, the RMA programme managed to mitigate somewhat the effects of the pandemic for the students. In fact,

the pandemic also led to innovative forms of teaching and learning, such as the creation in the Environmental Humanities course of a podcast which students can use outdoors. The committee thinks highly of such initiatives and all the more so because it will continue to be used in post-Corona times. Moreover, the programme intends to set up inter-track peer groups of students who support each other during the thesis writing process. The committee welcomes this initiative because the RMA thesis is traditionally a very individual activity and in times of (semi)-lockdown students feel even more lonesome and isolated.

#### **Considerations**

The committee considers that the RMA Humanities programme has created a dynamic learning environment featuring a strong and relevant curriculum, excellent research staff and a safe atmosphere for students to pursue their educational interests.

According to the committee, the programme structure is complex but internally consistent. Students have ample flexibility to tailor their own individual study plan, while the programme oversees that in all cases the set of courses and their respective learning goals cover the overall learning outcomes.

Although some tracks attract more students than others, altogether the single RMA programme is attracting more students than before. These students are invariably qualified for this programme as the admission requirements are clear and relevant. Students bring a variety of backgrounds which the programme uses in implementing the educational principle of the International Classroom. The committee welcomes this approach because it promotes different viewpoints and aligns with the interdisciplinary dimension of the programme. Moreover, it is an additional argument for the committee to endorse the argumentation of the programme to offer the RMA Humanities in English.

The track record of the individual lecturers and the external research assessments demonstrate according to the committee that the RMA is founded upon high quality research expertise of the teaching staff. These staff also have the necessary didactic skills and English language proficiency. Moreover, they are committed to the programme and to the students, whom they immerse in ongoing research.

Finally, the committee considers that the COVID-19 pandemic has had and continues to have an impact on the quality of education and the well-being of both students and staff. Overall, the programme is managing this crisis well. The committee appreciates the efforts of the staff to develop innovative alternatives for their courses, such as a podcast, which will continue to be offered in non-Covid times.

In addition to these positive considerations, the committee advises the programme to address the following issues in due course:

- to facilitate the production of individual study plans by communicating even more and more regularly on the various opportunities of the RMA curriculum
- to refine the Methodologies course turning it into the programme's flagship component;

- to develop a robust procedure that selects the most relevant students among a growing number of properly qualified applicants;
- to support students directly and indirectly in building a RMA Humanities cohort;
- to revive the Programme Committee as a quality assurance body that is representative of the tracks (students) and departments (staff) that form the programme;
- to increase the number / capacity of the staff in view of the flaws caused by the pandemic and the future ambitions of the programme;
- to identify opportunities for affordable language courses in Dutch as a service – and a potential marketing tool - to international students.

Based on the interviews and examination of the underlying documentation, the assessment committee concludes that the RMA programme Humanities **meets standard 2, teaching-learning environment**.



### 3. Student assessment

Student assessment at the RMA Humanities is organised very well. The assessment system is embedded in the policies and frameworks of both Faculty and University, and the assessment of individual courses takes place in a transparent way. Lecturers assume a central role in the quality of their assessments and support each other through review and feedback; the management produces and monitors the assessment plan, assessment materials are collected and archived systematically in dedicated course assessment files. The Examination Board and Assessment Chamber have important tasks in assuring the quality of assessment across the Faculty and for the RMA Humanities, and fulfil their roles in a professional and dedicated way. The completion of the thesis assessment forms requires attention: while the dedicated form is appropriate and some assessors complete it in an exemplary way, there is room for better quality and more consistent feedback. According to the assessment committee, the RMA programme Humanities **meets this standard**.

#### Findings

##### *Assessment system*

The committee gathered from the self-evaluation report that student assessment in the RMA Humanities is embedded in the faculty assessment policy, which in turn aligns with the university-wide assessment framework that was adopted in 2018. A guiding principle in the RMA Humanities is the faculty policy that quality assurance starts with, and depends on, the quality of the teaching staff. In so far as student assessment is concerned, this means that the principle of peer review is widely implemented with individual colleagues providing feedback on the design of tests and the assessment methods used by the lecturer / examiner. The discussions on site confirmed that tests are indeed peer reviewed prior to the exam date and that feedback is provided by fellow lecturers.

In line with faculty policy, the RMA Humanities has its own dedicated assessment plan, which is produced and regularly updated by the programme director. The committee has looked into this assessment plan, which describes the programme's educational vision and contents and how it proceeds towards achieving the learning outcomes. The point of departure is the university-wide didactic principle of constructive alignment; other principles include the search for a good balance between formative and summative

assessments, the use of various testing methods and an organisation of exams that allows for timely graduation. According to the committee, the assessment system and principles of the RMA Humanities are clear and relevant.

##### *Course assessment*

The programme's examination matrix shows how the learning goals of each course contribute to the learning outcomes at programme level and which assessment method is used to test the achievement of the respective learning goals and outcomes. The examination matrix lists a big variety of assessment modes, which are in four groups: tests, assignments, presentations, and other exam forms. The committee understands that in view of its specific research character, the RMA programme prefers assessment formats that test research oriented skills such as presentations and papers. It noticed, however, that some tracks tend to have an outspoken preference for one assessment mode, essay writing. The committee supports the plans of the programme director and track coordinators to introduce a better spread of the assessment methods across the programme and the tracks.

Every course in the RMA Humanities has an assessment file, which is completed by the lecturers. Such files offer insight in the quality of testing by

stipulating the relation between the learning outcomes, the learning goals and the assessment methods within a given course. The committee understood that this is a VU-wide policy and that RMA Humanities lecturers are supported to keep a digital filing system. According to the committee, the systematic collection and archiving of assessment related information constitutes a good practice.

Before students start a course they are informed of the relevant learning objectives and assessment modalities; after the assessment they get transparent individual feedback. The committee gathered from the materials and discussions that the assessment is indeed organised in a transparent way for students.

Finally, the committee was informed that the COVID-19 pandemic did not so much affect student assessment as it impacted on other parts of the programme. As mentioned above, many courses are assessed through written assignments; in other cases, oral presentations have been replaced by video recordings of the presentation.

#### *Thesis assessment*

The committee noticed that the RMA programme can rely on a number of resources to ensure that the thesis process runs smoothly: the faculty-wide thesis regulations, a thesis manual, a thesis agreement model, and a thesis assessment form. In the run-up to the assessment visit, the committee reviewed a sample of 15 theses and their respective assessment forms. The committee found that all resources are of good quality and – if used properly – indeed allow for a smooth and transparent thesis process. The committee noticed that on the one hand the dedicated assessment form ensures a valid and consistent assessment; on the other hand, the committee came across different assessment forms in its thesis review. The programme management indicated during the discussions on site that some supervisors continue to use the standard assessment form of their own department, rather than the dedicated RMA form.

The committee supports the efforts of the programme to ensure more harmonisation as well as the plan to appoint a thesis coordinator at programme level.

Such a thesis coordinator could also help overcome a flaw the committee noticed during the thesis review: the consistent and insightful completion of the thesis assessment forms. In fact, while the committee was very positive about the quality of the theses and rather positive on the pertinence of the final scores, it found that less than half of the evaluation forms had been completed in an insightful way. Overall, the committee noticed a good deal of variation in the length and detail of the comments and assessments with several assessors providing only limited, vague and general comments. According to the committee, there is room for better quality feedback with comments explaining why a student receives a certain score, and for a systematic completion of the assessment form in a consistent way across the different assessors. The envisaged position of a dedicated thesis coordinator could support this endeavour.

Finally, the committee noticed in two cases that assessors did not provide feedback on certain criteria apart from the indication that it was not their field of expertise. While it understands that in interdisciplinary programmes not every assessor can be expert on everything, it would be an option according to the committee to always add a third assessor from another discipline, besides one from the core discipline and the supervisor.

#### *Assurance of assessment quality*

The Examination Board is the internal supervisor for the quality of the programme. The Examination Board operates at faculty level and consists of two chambers for bachelor and master programmes. The quality control of the assessments is delegated by the Board to the Assessment Chamber. Currently the RMA Humanities is not represented in person on the Examination Board, but this will reportedly change in 2022. The Assessment Chamber consists of staff from all three

departments in the Faculty which delegate lecturers to the RMA programme.

The committee understood from the discussion with both Examination Board and Assessment Chamber representatives that there were hardly any problems with the RMA Humanities since its creation in 2017. For instance, there have been no cases of plagiarism in the recent past. There is a strong focus on academic skills and academic integrity in programme and students are also made aware of pitfalls of plagiarism in courses and during thesis supervision.

The Examination Board is responsible among other things for the approval of the study programmes. While some students do have problems in choosing courses and find it difficult to optimise their study plan in such a way that it suits their individual needs and at the same time meets the requirements of the programme, the committee was informed that this has not led to formal complaints.

Every year, the Assessment Chamber reviews a few assessment files per programme. On average it controls two courses and two theses of the RMA Humanities programme per year. The committee learned that thesis assessors are informed on the use of the correct evaluation form and called upon to provide consistent and insightful feedback. However, these messages need to be repeated often. Several assessors provide additional oral feedback to the student, which according to the assessment committee is of course laudable but does not solve the fundamental issue of accountability towards internal (Assessment Chamber) or external parties such as this assessment committee. The issue of second reviewers not being a content expert could be explained in two ways, according to the interviewees: the reviewer was selected to critically review the methodological part of the thesis, or it could be a sign of modesty on the side of the assessor. Anyway, it is obvious for the committee that in case only two assessors are involved, they should both be experts and capable of scoring all criteria.

### Considerations

The written materials, the thesis evaluation review and the discussions on site have convinced the committee that student assessment at the RMA Humanities is organised adequately. The assessment system is well embedded in the policies and frameworks of both Faculty and University. Moreover, the assessment of individual courses is organised in a transparent way.

The committee appreciates in particular the central position of the lecturers in ensuring the quality of their assessments and in supporting each other through review and feedback. The specific role of the Programme Director in producing and updating the assessment plan ensures that student assessment is at all times on the mind of the management. Moreover, the committee thinks the systematic collection and archiving of assessment materials in dedicated course assessment files is a good practice.

The Examination Board and Assessment Chamber have important tasks within the quality assurance system of the Faculty. The committee considers that the members of both groups assume their tasks professionally for the RMA Humanities.

The review of the thesis evaluation has demonstrated that the completion of the thesis assessment forms requires attention. While the dedicated form in itself is appropriate and some assessors complete this form in an exemplary way, there is room for better quality and consistent feedback in a majority of cases. The discussion with the programme management has made the committee understand that this issue will receive top priority. The committee strongly supports the appointment of a dedicated thesis coordinator for the RMA programme who should be able to address the flaws which the committee noticed during its review and monitor that assessors comply with the requirements and guidelines for good quality thesis feedback.

Based on the interviews and examination of the underlying documentation, the assessment committee concludes that the RMA programme Humanities **meets standard 3, student assessment.**

## 4. Achieved learning outcomes

Students who graduate from the RMA Humanities programme have the necessary competencies to move on in their career. Graduates achieve all general and track-specific learning outcomes; alumni take up a variety of interesting positions. Since the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the findings on the achieved learning outcomes confirm that the programme is doing a good job. According to the assessment committee, the RMA programme Humanities **meets this standard**.

### Findings

There are two ways to establish whether the programme learning outcomes have been achieved – through a quality review of the final products and through checking what graduates are doing after they finished the programme.

#### *Quality of thesis*

The RMA thesis is regarded as the end product of the programme: students demonstrate their specialised knowledge of one of the disciplines as well as their more general knowledge of the broad field of humanities; they also showcase their ability to present research findings in writing by means of proficient academic English. The committee noticed that in all ILOs are activated and tested in the RMA thesis (30 EC).

In line with the requirements of NVAO, the committee reviewed a sample of fifteen theses produced by students who graduated between September 2019 and August 2021. Based on a list of 39 entries the committee chair and secretary selected fifteen student numbers which were representative in terms of track/specialisation and final score. The selection also ensured a spread across thesis supervisors and thesis submission date.

The committee found that all fifteen theses were of sufficient quality to pass: the overall quality ranged from excellent (in several cases) to marginally sufficient (the lowest scored thesis of the entire sample). In two thirds of the cases the committee agreed to the final score given by the assessors. In the other cases, the difference was lim-

ited with the committee indicating that most theses were slightly overrated. There was no particular pattern in over/underrating per track.

According to the committee, theses are overall written in decent academic English and the sections on theory and methodology are generally fine. The Linguistics theses use state-of-the-art techniques and address relevant problems, which the committee thought was very refreshing. Moreover, several theses covered subjects that demonstrate the social relevance of the programme. The best RMA theses across the different tracks can definitely be published as scientific articles.

The committee noticed that notwithstanding the orientation of the programme, most theses did not pay particular attention to interdisciplinarity. Several interviewees indicated during the visit that students have considerable freedom in choosing the thesis topic and very often decide on a disciplinary topic as they consider that this might give them better chances for their PhD application afterwards.

Given the high quality of several theses, the committee wondered if it was possible for students to produce their thesis in the format of a scientific article. According to the programme representatives, this has not yet been done but could be an option, which will be taken up internally.

#### *Performance of graduates*

Another way to demonstrate the achievement of programme learning outcomes is to look at the whereabouts of the RMA Humanities graduates.

Initially the programme mainly focused on helping students achieve a research position in a PhD trajectory. In recent years, however, the programme has enlarged its objective and changed the curriculum to respond to new ambitions and career opportunities outside academia. According to the self-evaluation report, RMA Humanities alumni from every track/specialisation will hone their critical thinking and analytical skills and learn the tools of the trade, which puts them in an ideal position to pursue their future careers within and outside academia.

The committee gathered from the written materials and the discussions on site that RMA graduates are successful in their careers and end up in a wide variety of interesting positions which are commensurate with the domain, level and orientation of the programme: several graduates successfully obtained a position as PhD student, most alumni find research-oriented jobs outside academia (for instance as researcher or curator in museums), while other graduates, notably from the linguistics track, join industry.

Both the programme and the Faculty stay in touch with alumni. RMA graduates can join the specific Graduate School community on LinkedIn. According to both external and internal surveys alumni are very positive about the RMA programme: 91% of alumni indicated in the latest VU alumni monitor that they would enrol on the programme again.

This positive feeling was also present among the group of alumni the committee spoke to on site.

Among all differences in background, programme track and current position, the common element that stood out as absolutely positive was the individual study programme. Every graduate described with great enthusiasm how the programme allowed them to pursue their specific interest for more or less interdisciplinary courses, for a highly specialist or rather broad range of electives, for a particular internship or an extended study period abroad.

### Considerations

The committee considers that RMA Humanities students who graduate from the programme have the necessary competencies to move on in their career. Based on the results from its thesis review, the committee is very confident that graduates have achieved all general and track-specific learning outcomes: since the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the thesis quality confirms that the programme is doing a good job. Similarly, alumni end up in a wide variety of interesting positions which are commensurate with the domain, level and orientation of the programme. The committee considers that the alumni from the RMA Humanities are successful in their career, which in turn is a positive indication that graduates have indeed achieved the programme learning outcomes.

Based on the interviews and examination of the underlying documentation, the assessment committee concludes that the RMA programme Humanities **meets standard 4, achieved learning outcomes.**

## Attachments

## Attachment 1 Assessment committee

### **Jan Baetens**, chair

Jan is professor of Cultural Studies at the Arts Faculty of KU Leuven. He works in the field of poetry and French literary history and is specialised in the analysis of so-called minor genres, such as comics and graphic and photo-novels. Professor Baetens has extensive accreditation experience as committee member and chair.

### **Walter Daelemans**, member

Walter is professor of Computational Linguistics at the University of Antwerp, where he directs the Computational Linguistics and Psycholinguistics Research Centre (CLIPS). Professor Daelemans has been involved in external assessments before.

### **Tim Soens**, member

Tim is professor of Environmental History at the University of Antwerp, where his research focuses on moments of crisis and friction in the relationship between society and nature. He is member of the Antwerp Interdisciplinary Platform for Research into Inequality.

### **Alice Quinn Banville**, student member

Alice has a bachelor's degree from Trinity College Dublin in History of Art and Architecture and Classical Civilisations. She is a self-employed art researcher. At the time of the site visit, Alice was about to finish the Research Master Arts and Culture at the University of Amsterdam.

The assessment committee was supported by **Mark Delmartino**, external NVAO-certified secretary.

All committee members and the secretary signed a declaration of independence and confidentiality, which were submitted to NVAO.



## Attachment 2 Programme of the assessment

**Location:** Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, main building, Forum 4

### **Thursday 11 November 2021**

08.30 Arrival panel

09.00 Internal panel meeting

09.30 Session with faculty and programme management

10.30 Session with students

11.30 Session with lecturers

12.30 Lunch and internal panel meeting

13.30 Session with examination board

14.30 Session with alumni

15.45 Session with programme management

16.15 Internal panel deliberations

17.30 Feedback to programme stakeholders

A list with the names of the participants is available at AeQui.

## Attachment 3 Documents

### Information materials

- Self-Evaluation. Master Humanities (Research), Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam 2021.
- Appendices to the Self-Evaluation report:
  - Overview of intended learning outcomes
  - Annual plan RMA Humanities 2021-2022
  - Study Guide with course information
  - Humanities Master's TER 2021-2022
  - Overview of staff and staff qualifications Humanities RMA
  - Completion, drop-out rates and study duration
  - Factsheet programme
  - Materials on the Work placement
  - Materials on the organisation of the RMA thesis
  - Assessment policy Faculty of Humanities
  - Exam Checklist
  - Assessment plan and Assessment matrix Humanities RMA
  - Research reviews Philosophy, Language Communication Cognition and CLUE

### Additional information

The assessment committee could consult following documentation through a Surfdrive link put at disposition by the programme. It also had access to selected course materials on the university's electronic learning environment Canvas.

- Examination Board annual report 2020-2021
- RMA Humanities annual report 2020-2021
- Programme committee RMA annual report 2020-2021
- Assessment files Environmental Humanities 2020-2021
- Assessment files Humanities Research Career Preparation 2019-2020
- Assessment files Literature and History 2020-2021
- Assessment files Methodologies 2020-2021
- RMA Humanities Curriculum 2022-2023
- Composition of work field advisory board

### Graduation products

The assessment committee has studied the theses and their assessment of 15 students who graduated the programme in 2019 and 2020. A list with student numbers is available at AeQui.