

The logo for AeQui, featuring the letters 'AeQui' in a purple, sans-serif font. A light blue, hand-drawn style line loops around the letters, starting from the 'A', passing under the 'e', looping around the 'Q', and ending under the 'i'.

AeQui

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**Research Master  
Theology & Religious Studies  
University of Amsterdam**

*Report of the limited programme assessment  
4 November 2020*

Utrecht, The Netherlands  
February 2021  
[www.AeQui.nl](http://www.AeQui.nl)  
*Assessment Agency for Higher Education*

## Colophon

### Programme

University of Amsterdam

Research Master

Location: Amsterdam

Mode of study: fulltime

Croho: 60827

Result of institutional assessment: positive

### Panel

Prof. dr. A. F. de Jong, chair

Prof. dr. M. Sedgwick, domain expert

Prof. dr. A. Koch, domain expert

S. Adzokatse BA, student

Dr. J.M. Batteau, secretary

The panel was presented to the NVAO for approval.

The assessment was conducted under the responsibility of

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## Table of contents

Colophon .....	2
Table of contents .....	3
Summary .....	4
Introduction .....	6
1. Intended learning outcomes .....	9
2. Teaching-learning environment .....	11
3. Student assessment.....	17
4. Achieved learning outcomes .....	20
Attachments.....	23
Attachment 1 Assessment Panel .....	24
Attachment 2 Programme of the Assessment .....	25
Attachment 3 Documents .....	26

## Summary

On 4 November 2020, an assessment panel of AeQui visited the research master programme Theology and Religious Studies of the University of Amsterdam. The two-year full-time programme of 120 ECTS has an outstanding international reputation and a distinctive profile. It offers students a research-oriented and individualized curriculum, with notable strengths in Western Esotericism, Islam and Religious Diversity. This allows intellectual cross-fertilization in central areas of the study of religion. The panel judges that the programme meets each standard and therefore concludes that the overall quality of the programme **meets the standard** for a research master programme in Theology and Religious Studies.

### Intended learning outcomes

According to the panel, the programme's profile and objectives are fully consonant with (inter)national expectations in the domains of Theology and Religious Studies. It does not merely meet the expectations of the (inter)national domain of religious studies but in fact defines these expectations, most particularly in the context of Western Esotericism. The programme has formulated exit qualifications that are concrete, relevant, up-to-date and of the required level for a research master programme. The panel is impressed by the unique signature of the programme and considers it to be world-leading in its field. The panel judges that the programme **meets** this standard.

### Teaching-learning environment

The panel is very positive about the orientation, contents and structure of the programme, and has a great appreciation for all three areas of specialisation. According to the panel, the programme offers its students a challenging and an ambitious curriculum which is highly student-centred, with short lines and good communication between student and staff. The panel appreciates the balance between compulsory courses on the one hand and the freedom students have to design their own study trajectory by way of tutorials and electives. There is a strong research orientation throughout the whole of the curriculum, and a clear engagement with current debates, as is evident from module content and how the electives and tutorials are deployed. The panel characterizes staff members as highly qualified and dedicated researchers and educators, many of whom are world-leading in their field of research. Students receive good support, tutoring and guidance in acquiring the knowledge and research skills

specific to their interests. They are highly appreciative of their teachers and feel themselves to be very much part of a close-knit research community. The programme is selective in admitting students and has a clear intake-procedure, ensuring that the level and qualifications of incoming students are aligned with the content and goals of the programme. The panel judges that the programme **meets** this standard.

### Student assessment

The panel has established that the assessments of the programme are valid, objective and transparent due to the use of standard course manuals and assessment dossiers, good communication with students, staff professionalisation and the implementation of the four-eyes principle. The research master level is clearly reflected in the assessment criteria. The panel also appreciates the active and professional involvement of the Examinations Board, the members of which fulfil their tasks and responsibilities in a professional manner. The panel judges that programme **meets** this standard.

### Achieved learning outcomes

According to the panel, the level of the theses and the academic careers of the students make clear that the programme is able to achieve its intended learning outcomes. The theses are of outstanding quality and address a wide range of relevant subjects and innovative approaches. Students are well prepared for careers as academics. This is reflected in the relatively high percentage of graduates that continue as a PhD-candidate. The panel judges that the programme **meets** this standard.

### Recommendations

To support the programme in its further development, the panel would like to make the following recommendations:

- The panel has a high regard for the current international orientation and outstanding reputation of the programme. It strongly recommends that its unique profile be preserved for the future and that its qualities be taken into consideration as the programme seeks ways to ensure continuity.
- A number of staff members involved in the specialisation areas of Islam and Religious Diversity will be retiring in the following three years. The panel recommends that the programme invest in good transition management to ensure that

the excellent level and interdisciplinary diversity of the teaching team is maintained.

- The panel encourages the programme to further improve the assessment protocol (guidelines and assessment criteria) of the tutorials through a stronger alignment with the diverse learning trajectories of the students and the wide range of end products.
- As with other research master programme in this field, it is less clear what kind of careers graduates can pursue if they do not find an academic position. The panel encourages the programme to continue to think of ways of preparing students for other careers in which advanced research skills are required.

All standards of the NVAO assessment framework (2018) are assessed positively; the assessment committee therefore awards a positive recommendation for the accreditation of the programme.

On behalf of the entire assessment committee,  
Utrecht, February 2021

Prof.dr. Ab de Jong  
Chair

dr. Jesseka Batteau  
Secretary

## Introduction

This report describes the outcome of the assessment of the Research Master Theology and Religious Studies of the University of Amsterdam, which took place on 4 November 2020 as part of the cluster-evaluation of the Dutch Research Master Programmes of Theology & Religion. The University of Amsterdam is one of the largest in the Netherlands, offering its 30.000 students a wide range of programmes in many different disciplines. Presently, the university employs 6000 staff members and teachers. The Research Master Theology & Religious Studies programme is a two-year, full-time programme in which students are prepared to become skilled academic researchers in the broad, interdisciplinary field of Religious Studies.

### The Institute

Education and research at the University of Amsterdam are organised in seven Faculties: the Amsterdam Law School, the Faculty of Economics and Business, Faculty of Dentistry (ACTA), the Faculty of Medicine, the Faculty of Science, the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences and the Faculty of Humanities. The research master programme Theology and Religious Studies is part of the Graduate School of Humanities (Faculty of Humanities). The Graduate School of Humanities offers 35 master programmes, 9 research master programmes, 7 dual master programmes (part-time and full-time) and 2 teacher qualification master programmes.

### The Programme

The programme is a two-year full-time research master programme, amounting to 120 EC and is taught in English. It offers students three areas of specialisation: Islam, Religious Diversity and Western Esotericism. The English-taught programme focuses on the history and present of religious and spiritual diversity in Europe and in its wider Mediterranean, Eurasian and Transatlantic context. The programme emphasizes the processes of religious diversification in different socio-cultural contexts. It aims to train students in both the historical as well as the empirical study of religious cultures, countercultures and spiritualities, including the interdisciplinary study of ideas, narratives, practices, institutions and their interactions.

In the programme, religion is studied as a human phenomenon, based on the dynamics of social relations in historical and cultural contexts. The programme is therefore not theological (although theologies and doctrines can be the object of investigation).

The curriculum is based on the students' individual study paths, which they can map out through tutorials, electives and the thesis research project. In the two years (four semesters, 6 blocks) students are required to follow 42 EC of core courses, 12 EC in tutorials, 36 EC in electives. 30 EC is reserved for the thesis programme and project. The students partake in the research environment provided by the Amsterdam Institute for Humanities Research (AIHR) and the Amsterdam School of Historical Studies (ASH) of which all lecturers are a member.

Since the previous evaluation in 2014, no major changes have been made to the content and structure of the programme. However, there are several developments of importance to note:

- the programme has increased its focus on Islam in the modern world, religion and diversity with a focus on Europe, and Western Esotericism due to the refocusing in the regular one-year MA programme;
- Since 2016, the programme has established a cooperation agreement with the Research Master Programme in Religious Studies of

Utrecht University, which is part of the Research Master in Arts and Culture. The agreement covers collaboration and co-teaching of the Theories and Methods in the Study of Religion core course (15 EC), which is co-taught by lecturers from both programmes. Students enrolled at the University of Amsterdam can select courses from the Research Master Programme at the University of Utrecht and vice versa.

#### *Future of the programme*

In recent years, the Faculty Board of the Faculty of Humanities has embarked on a major restructuring of the portfolio of the Graduate School. As part of this process of restructuring, the Research Master Programme in Religious Studies has been examining options to partner with the UvA's Research Master's programme in History, which is taught in Dutch. However, this process of orientation has been delayed by the COVID19 pandemic. As became clear during the site visit, the programme is considering an alternative route to strengthen its viability by participating in the creation of a joint research master programme, together with Leiden University and Utrecht University.

#### **The Assessment**

The Faculty of Humanities of the University of Amsterdam assigned AeQui to perform a quality assessment of its research master programme in Theology and Religious Studies as part of the assessment of the cluster Research Master Programmes in Theology & Religious Studies, which also includes research master programmes in Theology & Religious Studies at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and University of Groningen. AeQui composed an independent and competent assessment panel, in close co-operation with the programme management of the three programmes of the cluster. The panel members are all experts in the field of Theology and/or Religious Studies, and have the necessary expertise and experience to assess the research master programme knowledgeably and thoroughly. The

panel has carried out 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 panel during the preliminary meeting and the final deliberations. All panel members have the necessary expertise to form a substantiated judgment on the position of the programme within its cluster.

In the spring of 2020, a preparatory meeting with representatives of the programme took place to exchange information and plan the date and programme of the site-visit. Originally, the site visit was to take place on 27 June 2020. However, due to the governmental restrictions in the context of COVID19, the assessment of the cluster was postponed to the fall and executed completely by digital means. In the case of the programme of the University of Amsterdam, the online site visit took place on 4 November 2020 via Zoom. For an overview of the site visit programme, see attachment 2.

In the run-up to the site visit, the panel studied the self-evaluation report of the programme and its supporting documents, and also reviewed a sample of student work, a total of 15 theses. The findings formed the basis and input for discussions during the site visit. The panel assessed the programme independently; at the end of the visit, the chair of the panel presented its initial findings to representatives of the programme and institution.

This document reflects the panel's findings, considerations and conclusions according to the NVAO framework for limited programme assessment (2018). It also takes into consideration the specification of additional criteria for research master programmes formulated by the NVAO (2016). A draft version of the report was sent to the programme management; its reactions have led to this final version of the report.

A development dialogue, initiated by the programme, was held on the same day of the assessment. The results of this development dialogue have had no influence on the assessment presented in this report.



## 1. Intended learning outcomes

Based on the interviews and examination of the underlying documentation, the assessment panel concludes that the programme **meets** the criteria for this standard. According to the panel, the programme's profile and objectives are fully consonant with (inter)national expectations in the domains of Theology and Religious Studies. It does not merely meet the expectations of the (inter)national domain of religious studies but in fact defines these expectations, most particularly in the context of Western Esotericism. The programme has formulated exit qualifications that are concrete, relevant, up-to-date and of the required level for a research master programme. The panel is impressed by the unique signature of the programme and considers it to be world-leading in its field. The panel strongly recommends that the current international orientation and specific profile be preserved for the future and that these be taken into consideration as the programme seeks ways to ensure its viability.

### Findings

The aim of the Research Master Programme in Theology & Religious Studies of the University of Amsterdam (UvA) is to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and understanding of the research field that is broadly defined as Religious Studies. It aims to help them achieve a level that allows them admission to a doctoral programme and equips them with the necessary competences to perform high-quality academic research. It also seeks to enable students to occupy a position in the public or private sector which calls for advanced research skills.

The programme offers three areas of specialisation: Islam, Religious Diversity and Western Esotericism. Its specific focus is on the historical and current religious practices in Europe and its wider Mediterranean, Eurasian and Transatlantic context, which it studies as a complex, plural field characterized by processes of change and transformation over time. It is concerned with processes of discursive transfer and exchange of practices between religious communities, with processes of canonisation, group formation and identity construction, and with the polemics and emerging conflicts connected to these processes. These phenomena, perspectives and processes are studied in a manner that crosses the traditional boundaries between academic disciplines

such as history, literary studies, sociology, anthropology and psychology and between traditional specialisations such as Jewish Studies, History of Christianity and Islamic Studies, and therefore often necessitates interdisciplinary approaches.

The profile of the programme is characterized by its broad, historical, cultural and interdisciplinary approach to the study of religion and its unique focus on the study of Western Esotericism. When compared to the other two independent research master programmes in the Netherlands, it is most similar to the programme in Groningen in the way religion is studied within a broad historical and cultural context. However, content-wise Groningen has different specialisations and also includes a theology track. The programme in Amsterdam has the most affinity with the programme offered at Utrecht University, which is part of the Research Master Programme in Arts and Culture, hence the collaboration with this programme for the core course Theories and Methods in the Study of Religion (15 EC). Both programmes have a strong focus on religious diversity and the role of religion and religious practices in society.

The research master programme at the UvA has translated its objectives into exit qualifications, which can be divided into two sections: A. general academic exit qualifications (A1 – A9), shared with

all master programmes, and B. programme specific exit qualifications. The programme specific exit qualifications state that the students should:

1. be able to apply the insights gained in their own field of study or discipline in related scientific domains;
2. be able to link topics from their field of study to current social debates and identify potential contributions;
3. be able to reflect on their own position and the knowledge they have gained and identify areas of development;
4. formulate a concise individual research approach that is embedded in current scientific questions;
5. have gained practical experience with ongoing international and national research.

The exit qualifications of the programme are directly derived from the Dublin Descriptors.

As mentioned in the introduction, at this point the programme is confronted with the consequences of the restructuring of the portfolio of programmes of the Graduate School. The intake of students is low and according to the Faculty of Humanities of the UvA, this poses a possible threat to the future of the programme. For this reason, the programme is investigating different routes that might ensure a more sustainable future. The first option presented is a merger or partnership with the Research Master Programme in History at the University of Amsterdam. The second scenario, explained during the site visit, is a collaborative or joint programme with Utrecht University and Leiden University.

### Considerations

Based on the documentation and the discussions with the representatives of the programme the panel concludes that the programme's profile and objectives fully meet the requirements in the international academic field of Religious Studies. The specialisation area in Western Esotericism is

world-leading and defines expectations concerning depth, breadth and methodologies. Similar programmes offered in this field of enquiry are measured against the exceptionally high standard set and by the research conducted by the lecturers teaching the subject. The panel is also impressed by the specialisation areas of Islam and Religious Diversity, though they take up a smaller proportion of the programme. The panel is positive about the exit qualifications that are concrete, current, relevant and of the required research master level. The research orientation and requirements are made explicit in the programme objectives as well as in its exit qualifications. The panel observes that the programme's goal to prepare its students for a PhD programme or academic research in other professional domains is indeed clearly formulated in its objectives and exit qualifications.

With regard to the viability of the programme, the panel strongly emphasizes the importance of retaining the unique and international profile of the curriculum. Partnering with the Research Master Programme in History could have several unfavourable consequences, in the sense that this transition would mean that the language of instruction would switch from English to Dutch, thus restricting the intake of international students. Furthermore, the international visibility of the programme and the broad interdisciplinary focus could be weakened by a transfer to this department, a risk that was also voiced by students in the student chapter. The panel proposes a careful consideration of the consequences of the choices made and stresses the importance of preserving such an exceptional and internationally recognized programme.

In conclusion, based on the documentation and the interviews, the panel judges that the programme indeed fully **meets** the criteria formulated for standard 1.

## 2. Teaching-learning environment

Based on the interviews and examination of the underlying documentation, the assessment panel concludes that the programme **meets** the criteria for this standard. The panel is very positive about the orientation, contents and structure of the programme, and has a great appreciation for all three areas of specialisation. According to the panel, the programme offers its students a challenging and an ambitious curriculum which is highly student-centred, with short lines and good communication between student and staff. The panel appreciates the balance between compulsory courses on the one hand and the freedom students have to design their own study trajectory by way of tutorials and electives. There is a strong research orientation throughout the entire curriculum, and a clear engagement with current debates, as is evident from module content and how the electives and tutorials are deployed. The panel characterizes staff members as highly qualified and dedicated researchers and educators, many of whom are world-leading in their field of inquiry. Students receive good support, tutoring and guidance in acquiring the knowledge and research skills specific to their interests. They are highly appreciative of their teachers and feel themselves to be very much part of a close-knit research community. The panel stresses the importance of good transition management to ensure that the excellent level and interdisciplinary diversity of the teaching team is maintained after the retirement of a number of staff members involved in the areas of specialisation of Islam and Religious Diversity. The programme is selective in admitting students and has a clear intake-procedure that ensures that the level and qualifications of incoming students are aligned with the content and goals of the programme.

### Findings

#### Content

The Research Master in Theology and Religious Studies is a two-year, full-time programme consisting of 120 EC. The curriculum is composed of the following modules:

- 42 EC of Core Courses
- 12 EC of Tutorials
- 36 EC of Electives
- 30 EC Thesis Programme

The academic year is divided into two semesters of each three blocks. These are structured in such a way that students combine core courses with electives and tutorials, with a build-up in the amount of EC students have to compose their own study trajectory through electives and tutorials, culminating in the 30 EC thesis project: in the first year, students follow 30 EC in core courses, in the second year 12 EC in core courses.

The design of the programme ensures that students acquire the necessary knowledge and skills

formulated in the exit qualifications in a structured and methodological manner. The level and complexity of module content increases as the student progresses through the programme, and the degree of independence and self-guidance required of the student intensifies.

#### Core courses

The core courses are mandatory for all students in the research master: *Theories and Methods in the Study of Religion* (15 EC) is offered in collaboration with the Utrecht University and has two coordinators and guest lecturers from both the UvA and the UU. It covers the main debates about the role of religion in modern culture and new approaches to the study of religion. The course has a special focus on the history of the discipline of Religious Studies, contemporary critical theory, and methodical issues concerning ethnographic and historical research.

The second core course titled *Religious Experience* (12 EC) studies the debate on the analytical value of the concept of experience in religious scholar-

ship. Students are introduced to different conceptualizations of the notion of experience and various types of research and meta-theoretical perspectives concerning the configuration of religion and experience. The third core course titled *Nature and the Supernatural* engages students specifically with cultural-historical research on notions of Nature and the Supernatural that have been fundamental to human culture since antiquity.

The seminar titled *Current Issues in Religious Studies* (3 EC) is offered as a year-long module that brings students in contact with the research topics of the current research projects of UvA staff, guest lecturers and PhD students. The course focuses specifically on the critical analysis and discussion of written and presented research papers and on the training of the related analytical and communicative skills.

#### *Tutorials*

The tutorials allow the students to familiarize themselves with current research in the field, research methods and research practices. In a tutorial setting, the students usually work in small groups of 1 to 3 participants with a member of the academic staff of their choice. Tutorial subjects are suggested by staff members and are informed by their current research interests (taking the form of research internships) but may be proposed by the students as well. Students can use tutorials to prepare papers or posters for conferences or to write papers or book reviews intended for publication in academic journals. They may also use a tutorial to prepare a PhD proposal.

#### *Electives*

In the programme, students can deepen and/or broaden their research profile by choosing electives. These electives may be selected from the three one-year MA tracks in Religious Studies: *Islam in the Modern World*, *Religious Diversity in Europe* and *Western Esotericism*. Students are also encouraged to follow courses (up to 12 EC) related to their research interests at national research schools, such as the Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion

(NOSTER) or the Netherlands Interuniversity School for Islamic Studies (NISIS). 6 EC at a national research school is mandatory.

#### *Thesis project*

To complete the programme, the students conduct an extended thesis research project (12 EC) in the final semester of the second year, which is reported on in the research master thesis (18 EC). The students are expected to demonstrate their capacities and skills to perform independent research and to meet adequate standards in reporting on this research. Prior consent from the supervisor is necessary for the research topic and the title of the thesis. The supervisor also discusses the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) with the student, where appropriate. A compulsory thesis seminar supports students in finalizing their thesis programme. The seminar allows the students to present and discuss their research plans and to exchange advice and tips for improving the process of writing the thesis.

The panel has reviewed various courses presented in the context of the site visit. It also spoke with students and teachers about the content and goals of the modules, tutorials and electives. The panel observes that the core modules are of the required research master level and meet the objectives formulated by the programme. It judges that the balance between mandatory courses and tutorials/electives is well thought through and that students are very capable in mapping out their study trajectories and formulating concrete goals for the two years of their study. The students are well prepared for a PhD-position.

The panel has studied an overview in which the relationship between the learning objectives, learning trajectories and assessment criteria are made explicit, and can confirm that all exit qualifications are addressed in the curriculum and that there is an appropriate build-up in level, complexity and student independence.

## Orientation

### *Research orientation in the programme*

The programme clearly has an advanced and international research orientation, in line with the additional criteria formulated by the NVAO (2016). The difference between the one-year master and the two-year research master is reflected in content and design, as well as outcomes. The key exit qualifications of the programme concern knowledge, insight, and judgment formation as well as communication skills required to perform high-quality academic research and present the results of that research at international conferences or publish them in international, peer-reviewed scientific journals.

The teaching of generic research-skills is integral to the programme, both within the core courses as well as in the tutorials and electives. For example, the three large core courses conclude with a mini-conference organized by the students. During these conferences, students present draft versions of the research papers that have to be submitted at the end of their course. Additionally, in the monthly seminar *Current Issues in Religious Studies*, students can practice their presentation and moderation skills and interact with guest-lecturers and members of the Religious Dynamics and Cultural Diversity (RDCCD) research group.

The tutorials and thesis are designed to meet the more advanced research-oriented exit qualifications, with a strong focus on independently formulating research questions, operationalization of those questions and formulating a research plan; independently conducting research, applying appropriate methodologies; and reporting on the research orally and in writing according to the standards accepted within the field of Religious Studies. The tutorials and thesis projects have led to students presenting papers and posters at international conferences and to the publication of papers and book reviews in academic peer-reviewed journals and volumes. Compared to the one-year programme, the research master thesis must convey a more in-depth use of sources or

more extensive fieldwork, a more rigorous application of methodology, a more critical approach to existing theories and concepts, and the originality and creativity of the research. In addition, it has to demonstrate an advanced graduate intellectual level, the preparedness for a PhD project, and the potential to publish at least part of the research. These criteria are made concrete in the assessment form for the thesis (see also chapter 4).

### *Research environment*

The Amsterdam Institute for Humanities Research (AIHR), consisting of five research schools, provides the research environment for all research master students of the Faculty of Humanities. All researchers teaching in the Research Master of Religious Studies are affiliated with the Amsterdam School of Historical Studies (ASH), which focuses on the analysis of the past from antiquity to the present day, exploring historical topics alongside their contemporary implications. Within ASH, teachers are members of two research groups: all participate in the Religious Dynamics and Cultural Diversity-research group, and a number of staff members also participate in the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents-research group.

The research schools and research groups organize seminars, lectures and conferences, many in collaboration with the Center for the History of Hermetic Philosophy (HHP), or with various (inter)nationally funded projects. These activities enable regular exchange between research master students, PhD candidates, postdocs and senior staff members. The students have the opportunity to participate in the research of the Schools during their core courses or via tutorials (for example, by doing a research internship). They are also encouraged to align their research with a research project of the lecturers, or they can be involved in international research projects through research internships or assistantships.

As mentioned in the previous section, students are also encouraged to follow courses at the na-

tional research schools, which gives them the opportunity to engage with peers and specialists, and stay up-to-date with current developments in their field of interest.

To prepare students for a PhD-position, the Faculty of Humanities offers students workshops on writing PhD-proposals. Students specializing in Western Esotericism can also attend the biennial *Thesis Workshop* organised by the capacity group for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents in collaboration with the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE).

The panel concludes that the students in the research master programme are offered a good research environment through their active involvement with the research schools of the Amsterdam School of Historical Studies of the Faculty of Humanities and the national research schools.

Furthermore, it observes that students acquire the necessary generic research skills, as well as the required knowledge and experience in research methodologies for the execution of their thesis project. In its conversations with staff and students the panel learned that the knowledge and application of methodologies are primarily acquired via the tutorials and electives. This approach seems to be successful, given the fact that students have no problem in mastering the appropriate methods and approaches for the study of their subject of choice.

### **Structure**

The didactic philosophy of the programme can be described as highly activating and thoroughly student-centred. The programme subscribes to the vision on teaching and learning of the University of Amsterdam, which, among others, focusses on the development of motivated and ambitious students, is aimed at supporting students in acquiring skills and knowledge that will allow them to flourish in a complex world and the provision of an open and diverse learning- and research community in which students feel at home. These aspects are reflected in the approach to teaching and learning in the programme. The panel is very impressed with the way students are stimulated,

guided and supported in giving shape to their own study paths and becoming independent researchers. The study programme is not only very flexible and tailored to the needs of the individual students, but also very activating in that the programme incorporates many interactive learning modes, such as workshops, mini-conferences and individual tutoring. Students feel themselves to be part of the research community of the Faculty and international students feel very welcome.

Though students follow different trajectories, the programme as a whole shows itself to be a close-knit learning and inclusive research community in which students feel both challenged and nurtured. Students the panel spoke to identify with the programme, conveying a real sense of fellowship.

### **Incoming students**

The programme has a clear and selective admissions procedure to ensure that incoming students match, and are aware of, the requirements of the programme. The admission procedure is described in the programme's Teaching and Examination Regulations. Students must have a Bachelor's degree from an accredited university in the Humanities, Social Sciences, Law, the Liberal Arts and Sciences or a comparable degree programme. Additionally, the student is required to have obtained 24 EC in Religious Studies courses to be admitted to the research master programme. Furthermore, the student must explain why he or she wishes to enrol and submit a clear study plan for the two years of the programme. Students must also have an average study result of 7,5 in the post-propaedeutic phase of their previous studies. Finally, students need to provide proof of a sufficient level of proficiency in English.

The Admissions Board, acting on behalf of the Examinations Board, determines whether candidates meet the admission requirements. Students starting in the one-year master programme can transfer to the research master programme in February if they meet all the admissions criteria (description of motivation, study plan, grades and

language proficiency). The modules they have already followed and passed can then be deployed as electives. In its conversations with representatives of the programme, the panel learned that most of the research master students have indeed transferred from the one-year master to the two-year research master programme. It could confirm that students are indeed required to meet the same admissions criteria as students entering the research programme directly.

All information about the study programme, career prospects, entry requirements, application procedure and deadlines are published on the website of the Graduate School of Humanities, and are presented during Open Days, when prospective students can meet the coordinator and core lecturers of the programme.

#### **Staff**

All lecturers involved in the programme are experienced lecturers with a PhD and a University Teaching Qualification. The core team of lecturers consists of three full professors, two associate professors, and three assistant professors. They have broad interdisciplinary backgrounds, ranging from history of religion, comparative religion, Islamic studies, Arabic studies, cultural history, intellectual history to social sciences, and therefore well suited to the requirements of the programme. Professors are active members on the boards of various national research schools, lecturers are regularly involved in teaching at these schools. One of the full professors is a member of the KNAW.

All core lecturers are internationally recognized researchers, which can be evidenced from their extensive intellectual output and participation in international academic networks, associations and research projects. They are also successful in acquiring national and international research grants. The History of Hermetic Philosophy Group (HHP) provides permanent funding for two PhD positions.

The panel is impressed by the quality and dedication of all teachers and staff of the research master. It has been able to establish that the lecturers involved in the programme have a very high level of expertise and are fully qualified to teach, support, guide and tutor the students enrolled in the programme. Many of the teachers are world-leading in their field of inquiry and are therefore able to introduce students to cutting edge research approaches and insights. At this point, a number of the staff members involved in the religious studies area will be retiring over the coming three years. The panel would like to emphasize the exceptional quality of the current team as a whole and strongly encourages the programme to manage the transition in such a way that the continuity and interdisciplinary diversity of staff members is maintained.

#### **Language**

The programme is taught in English. The panel fully underwrites this choice for English as language of instruction, given the international reputation of the programme, the international student body, the international backgrounds of the staff members and the international scope of the areas of specialisation. From the start, the research master has aimed to offer a selective degree programme for national and international students who wish to pursue a career in academic research. For this reason, it has been offered in English from the outset. The programme has from the start been able to attract students from a diverse range of countries such as the UK, Ireland, Sweden, Slovakia, Ukraine, but also Argentina, Brazil, Columbia, Canada and the United States. Likewise, teaching staff have a strong international orientation and/or background: the panel observed that all have the necessary language skills and engage actively in the international academic community specific to their field of expertise. Furthermore, the programme pays attention to English proficiency when hiring new staff members, and lecturers have the opportunity to improve their language skills through language training courses.

### Tutoring and guidance

Research master students within the programme receive individual guidance from their thesis supervisor and the coordinator of the programme. The coordinator of the programme informs prospective students about the aim, content and structure of the programme. The coordinator conducts intake interviews with students, discusses their study plans with them, offers advice concerning the selection of a national research school and electives and tutorials. Students are encouraged to choose a supervisor for their research project as early as possible. The supervisor (or, if the student has not yet found a supervisor, the coordinator) helps them to configure their study path and their thesis project. Students also discuss their choice of electives and tutorials with their supervisor, in order to arrive at a well-balanced study programme.

The coordinator remains available as an advisor to all students in the programme and invites them for tutor meetings at least once a year to discuss their study progress. Students may get in touch if they have any questions or concerns about the content of the programme. Besides, two study advisors can help students with a wide range of questions and problems.

The research tutorials also play an important role in the individual guidance and the development of specific research skills. Students can select their own tutors for specific purposes, related to their own research goals, and work in small groups, or one-on-one, on a current research topic with a staff member.

The panel has a very positive impression of the way students receive guidance in the programme. The students and alumni are very content with the personal approach of their supervisors and tutors. The support they receive enables them to successfully navigate the programme and compile an individual study trajectory in their field of interest.

### Considerations

As can be derived from the above, the panel is positive about the different aspects of the teaching and learning environment. The panel has much appreciation for the way the areas of specialisation – Islam, Religious Diversity and Western Esotericism – have been given form in the curriculum and is very positive about its engagement with current social and cultural debates in the programme. It has much appreciation for the content, orientation and structure of the curriculum, which is well-structured with a good build-up in level, complexity and student independence, while also being highly student-centred. There is a good balance between mandatory courses and study units which allow students to follow their research interests. The orientation of the curriculum is fully aligned with what is expected from an international research master programme. This is expressed in the content of the modules, the tutorials, electives and the thesis project, as well as in the dynamics of the international classroom. Students are actively included in the international research environment of the Faculty's research schools as well as the national research schools. The panel is appreciative of the selective admissions procedure and concludes that the programme succeeds in enrolling students that meet the high demands of a research master programme. The level of staff members is high, they prove themselves to be highly skilled educators and expert researchers, and are appreciated as such by the students. The panel is very positive about the interdisciplinary diversity of the team and stresses the importance of good management in the replacement of retiring faculty members in specialisation areas of Islam and Religious Diversity. Students receive good tutoring from their teachers and acquire the necessary support, knowledge, skills to complete the programme.

With these considerations in mind, the panel judges that the programme **meets** this standard.



### 3. Student assessment

Based on the interviews and examination of the underlying documentation, the assessment panel concludes that the programme **meets** the criteria for this standard. The panel has established that the assessments of the programme are valid, objective and transparent due to the use of standard course manuals and assessment dossiers, good communication with students, staff professionalisation and the implementation of the four-eyes principle. The research master level is clearly reflected in the assessment criteria. The panel encourages the programme to further develop its assessment protocol for the tutorials in line with diverse learning trajectories and end products of the tutorials. The panel also appreciates the active and professional involvement of the Examinations Board, the members of which fulfil their tasks and responsibilities in a professional manner.

#### Findings

##### *Quality of assessments*

The assessment system of the programme is based on the requirements and standards set out in the assessment policy framework of the University of Amsterdam. The programme ensures that the course objectives and assessments are aligned with the exit qualifications. This is achieved through the structural use of course manuals and carefully compiled and archived assessment dossiers, which is standard policy at the Faculty of Humanities. The programmes and examiners are responsible for providing the assessment dossiers, which are archived by the faculty. Each programme discusses what form of assessment to use in the curriculum. The programme director is responsible for the matching of the learning objectives with the assessment criteria and for compiling an assessment programme. An examiner appointed by the Examinations Board ensures that the assessments match the learning objectives and is responsible for the assessment dossier. Most assessments are peer-reviewed before use. Module evaluations help to determine whether the assessments were indeed transparent to the students. In these procedures, the programme can safeguard the transparency, objectivity and validity of its assessments.

The programme uses different forms of assessment, depending on the content and learning

methods applied during the course. The examinations of the three core courses consist of oral presentations, mini-conferences, written research papers, and in one course a written essay. The *Current Issues in Religious Studies* core course has only formative tests: students introduce the speakers of the sessions, function as chair for the sessions, and respond to the speakers several times during the year. They also write several critical analyses of the presentations of the speakers. Assessment in the tutorials is more varied. The guidelines are the same for research internships. If students use tutorials or internships to prepare for a conference or write an article for an academic journal, the final product of the tutorial will be assessed by the tutor. Electives have various forms of assessment, ranging from midterm and final papers, to presentations, research assignments and written examinations, depending on the courses students choose.

The panel reviewed various policy documents regarding assessments as well as samples of course manuals and assessment dossiers in preparation for the site visit. It concludes that overall, the assessment system is clear and transparent, as well as valid and objective. The course manuals are clear and give good information about assessment timing, criteria, weighing and feedback. The panel does however observe that the assessment of tutorials/internships is harder to evaluate, given the wide variety of forms these can take on.

Though the programme has developed guidelines, manuals and a standard assessment form for tutorials, these seem to be geared towards one particular research 'product', i.e. a research paper, whereas the outcome of tutorials seems to be far more varied than this. How other products are assessed remained unclear to the panel. The panel was happy to hear that the Examinations Board will be reviewing the assessment of tutorials shortly as part of their monitoring of the quality of assessments (see below).

#### *Staff professionalisation*

In recent years, the UvA has intensified its investment in staff professionalisation. Next to the University Teaching Qualifications, the UvA has organised various Educational Leadership programmes and courses for lecturers regarding teaching methods, test constructions and assessments, quality assessments, curriculum developments and best practices. Programme leaders, members of the Programme Committee, delegates of the Examinations Board and lecturers have participated in and contributed to these programmes and courses. Also, the chair of staff meetings regularly invites professionals to share insights and new developments in, for example, research-intensive education, blended learning, inclusive education, the international classroom and assessment of examinations.

#### *Examinations Board*

During the site visit, the panel spoke with members of the Examinations Board of the Graduate School of Humanities. The Examinations Board monitors the quality of assessment of all master and research master programmes of the Graduate School and consists of different members from the Faculty of Humanities. Every cluster of programmes nominates a delegate to serve as the linking pin between the board and the programme. The delegate, being close to the programme, can inform the board on certain issues and questions they may have. The Examinations Board also communicates regularly with the programme committees of the different programmes

to hear whether there are certain problems or topics that need to be addressed.

The board determines the rules and guidelines relating to the administering of assessments and examinations and appoints examiners. It monitors the final assessment procedures and establishes whether students indeed meet the required end level of the programme. Courses taken by students at National Research Schools are also subject to approval and recognition by the Examinations Board.

In its conversations with the Examinations Board, the panel received a very positive impression of the way it functions and executes its duties. The board invests in proactive monitoring: each year the board conducts a thorough review of a sample of course manuals and assessment dossiers, looking at evaluation forms, feedback given and the formal conditions of the assessment. Every year, the board addresses a different theme and looks at a different selection of programmes. Findings are reported back to the programme in question as well as to other programmes so that these can also benefit from these insights.

With regard to assessment of research tutorials and internships, the Examinations Board confirmed that they were indeed preparing to review the assessment procedures; the guidelines had only just been finalized by the Faculty of Humanities. The board conveyed that in the case of tutorials and internships, it was important to recognize the diversity of the tutorials and internships in their learning methods and outcomes and that the assessment procedure, criteria and form should reflect this diversity by also leaving room for education out of ordinary. A perspective that the panel endorses.

#### *Assessment of theses*

All master and research master programmes of the Faculty of Humanities are subject to a set of thesis regulations formulated by the Examinations Board. The board specifies the requirements which every thesis is expected to meet, and the programme makes use of a standardized manual and assessment form for the research master thesis. The manual contains information about the

thesis requirements, supervision, submission and assessment of the thesis, the resit for a thesis, and guidelines for students if they encounter problems or have a complaint. The thesis is always assessed by two lecturers, the supervisor of the thesis programme and a second examiner. The responsibilities of the second examiner are to accept an outline of the thesis and assess the final draft of the thesis submitted. Both examiners are appointed by the Examinations Board. Every year, the Examinations Board checks the quality of the theses and assessments of several programmes. The findings and recommendations are shared with all programme directors of the Graduate School who are urged to use this information to monitor own thesis assessment protocols.

The report of the last visitation in 2014 raised some concerns about the appointment of examiners and the active involvement of the Examinations Board in the quality control of the research master theses. To improve these aspects, the Examinations Board has formulated clear criteria for the appointment of examiners, has shared the thesis evaluation reports with all programme directors, and has instructed delegates to screen the thesis assessment forms which are submitted in Canvas.

In preparation for the site visit, the panel reviewed 15 theses and assessments of the most recent graduates (three cohorts) of the programme. The panel observes that the assessments of the theses are clear, objective and give sufficient written feedback to the student. The panel agrees with the grades given. Assessments of the theses seem fair and transparent; it is clear why a student receives the grade in question. The panel did remark on the fact that the programme uses only one assessment form, so that the two examiners must agree on the grade given. However, it concluded that this is a defensible choice since the second examiner has the option to convey a separate opinion in the form.

### Considerations

Based on the findings described above, the panel concludes that the programme's assessment system meets the required standards. The programme uses different kinds of assessments in alignment with the learning goals per course unit and ensures that the assessment criteria are indeed aligned with the research master level. The transparency, objectivity and validity of the assessments are ensured through the use of standard course manuals and assessments dossiers, good communication of assessment information with students, structural course evaluations, staff professionalisation and the application of the four-eyes principle in assessment design and assessment of the thesis.

The panel approves of the assessment protocol for the theses and confirms that the grades of the theses it reviewed are indeed a good reflection of the content and level of these end products.

The panel is very positive about the professional and proactive manner in which the Examinations Board carries out its tasks; it has a clear view on its responsibilities and keeps a view on assessment qualities through yearly sample reviews. The panel appreciates the measures taken in response to the recommendations of the previous evaluation and confirms that the monitoring of the end level and the theses has improved substantially. The panel encourages the programme to develop a clear assessment protocol for the tutorials in its programme that reflects the variety of the possible end products of these course units. It appreciates that the Examinations Board will be reviewing the guidelines, manual and assessment form of the tutorials, and is confident that the programme will arrive at an appropriate assessment protocol that respects the diversity of this valuable educational form.

Based on the interviews and examination of the underlying documentation, the panel establishes that the programme **meets** this standard.

## 4. Achieved learning outcomes

Based on the interviews and examination of the underlying documentation, the assessment panel concludes that the programme **meets** the criteria for this standard. According to the panel, the level of the theses and the academic careers of the students make clear that the programme is able to achieve its intended learning outcomes. The theses are of outstanding quality and address a wide range of relevant subjects and innovative approaches. Students are well prepared for careers as academics. This is reflected in the relatively high percentage of graduates that continue as a PhD-candidate. However, as with other research master programmes in this field, it is less clear to the panel what kind of careers graduates are able to pursue if they do not find an academic position. The programme is aware of this and has initiated measures to also prepare students for other research positions in the public or private domain.

### Findings

As indicated, the panel studied 15 theses and their assessment in preparation for the site visit. The panel is very impressed by the outstanding quality of the theses: they convey excellent research skills, are based on good formulations of the research problem, are sufficiently complex and address a wide variety of relevant and current subjects, often with a historical perspective. There is both breadth and depth to the topics researched. Students have put in a lot of hard work in their project to ensure that the thesis is of a high standard. Panel members indicated that these students would certainly be eligible for a PhD-trajectory and were pleased to learn that some of them had already been accepted into a PhD-programme. The research style of the programme is not highly formatted but can be characterized as more 'free style' in comparison to other programmes in Religious Studies: students do not have to tick a series of prescribed boxes in the execution of research cycle. The panel appreciates this approach and recognizes it as a legitimate research style, which, if applied rigorously, can lead to innovative insights and knowledge. In this sense, the programme without a doubt lives up to its profile as a research master.

That students achieve the research master level is also reflected in the recognition they receive. Several graduates have won awards for their research and many students have been able to pre-

sent their research for the thesis project at international conferences or have published their findings in international journals. A number of students were able to present research papers written for tutorials or as part of extracurricular activities at international conferences and publish their work in international journals even before graduation.

A third of the programme's students is able to find a PhD-position after graduation, either in the Netherlands or at another university abroad. This is a relatively high number in comparison to other research master programmes in the field. Nevertheless, a substantial number of students does not succeed in finding a suitable academic position. The panel learned of the different careers of the graduates outside academia, but it was not able to determine if these functions indeed demand the research skills acquired in the research master. In its discussions with representatives of the programme, the panel did find that the programme is aware of the scarcity of research positions for graduating students. Students graduating in the specialisation area of Western Esotericism have a slight advantage in comparison to the other areas of specialisation, given that The History of Hermetic Philosophy Group provides permanent functions for two PhD-students. The programme has also taken measures to prepare students for other vocations in which research is key by involving alumni of the research master in sessions devoted to alternative career options. The

panel would like to encourage the programme to continue to think about ways of preparing students for research functions in the public and private domain, and to be very clear and open about the thoroughly competitive nature of an academic career.

### **Considerations**

Based on its findings the panel judges that the students in the programme indeed achieve the intended learning outcomes. The end level is very high, given the outstanding quality of the thesis and the way students are prepared for a career as

an academic. Students practice publishing in international journals and presenting at international conferences, even before they graduate. Many go on to continue their studies as a PhD-candidate. The programme is aware of the fact that not all students are able to do so and the panel encourages it to continue to think of ways of preparing students for other careers in which advanced research skills are required.

Based on the interviews and examination of the underlying documentation, the assessment panel establishes that the programme **meets** this standard.



## Attachments

## Attachment 1 Assessment Panel

Prof. dr. A.F. (Ab) de Jong	Ab de Jong is professor of Comparative Religion and Religions of Antiquity – Leiden University Centre for the Study of Religion. He is board member of NOSTER, The Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion, and KNAW member.
Prof. dr. M. (Mark) Sedgwick	Mark Sedgwick is Professor of Arab and Islamic Studies, Department of Culture and Society, Aarhus University Denmark.
Prof. dr. A. (Anne) Koch	Anne Koch is Research Professor at University College of Education, Linz (Austria) for Interreligiosity, Religious Pluralism and Study of Religion at Z.I.M.T. Centre of Interreligiosity, Migration Education & Multilingualism.
BA S.D. (Seth) Adzokatse	Seth Adzokatse is a Research Master Student Theology and Religion at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

The panel was supported by Jesseka M. Batteau PhD.



## Attachment 2 Programme of the Assessment

### Schedule external review RM Theology and Religious Studies (via Zoom)

Wednesday 4 November 2020

8.30 – 9.00	<i>Internal deliberation panel</i>
9.00 – 9.45	<i>Interview with Faculty representatives (including presentation)</i> Topics: introduction study programme, purpose and schedule
9.45 – 10.00	Break
10.00 – 11.00	<i>Interview with students</i> Topics: study programme, assessment, thesis supervision, quality of teachers
11.00 – 11.15	Break
11.15 – 12.15	<i>Interview with teaching staff (including programme committee representative)</i> Topics: goals of the study programme, programme, assessment, quality of teachers
12.15 – 13.15	<i>Lunch &amp; Internal deliberation panel</i>
13.15 – 14.00	<i>Interview with alumni</i> Topics: Connection study programme to the field of work, assessment and thesis guidance
14.00 – 14.15	Break
14.15 – 14.45	<i>Interview with Examinations Board</i> Topics: assessment and achieved learning outcomes
14.45 – 15.00	Break
15.00 – 16.30	<i>Internal deliberations panel/ formulating conclusions/ additional research</i>
16.30 – 16.45	<i>Presentation preliminary findings</i>
16.45 – 17.00	Break
17.00 – 17.45	<i>Development dialogue</i>

## Attachment 3 Documents

- Self-Evaluation report
- Teaching and Examination Regulations (learning objectives and exit qualifications)
- Overview curriculum
- Quantitative data programme
- CV's staff members programme
- Thesis regulations and assessment form
- Assessment plan programme
- Lists of publications and presentations by students and graduates
- Overview course materials and assessment dossiers:
  1. *Theories and Methods in the study of Religion*;
  2. *Religious Experience*
- Show Cases:
  1. Core Course: *Current Issues in Religious Studies*;
  2. Student involvement in 7th International Conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (July 2019, Amsterdam);
  3. Student involvement in activities of the Center for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and related Currents
- Memo recent developments in the programme
- Research review Amsterdam Institute for Humanities Research
- Faculty Chapter and appendices
- Theses of 15 students