

Assessment report
Limited Framework Programme Assessment

Master Communication Science

University of Amsterdam

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1. Executive summary

In this executive summary, the panel presents the main considerations which led to the assessment of the quality of the Master Communication Science programme of University of Amsterdam, which has been assessed according to the standards of the limited framework, as laid down in the NVAO Assessment framework for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands, as published on 20 December 2016.

The programme objectives are sound and relevant. The programme profile is clear. The panel welcomes the programme objectives to educate students in the specialisations of either corporate communication, entertainment communication, persuasive communication or political communication. The panel supports the programme intentions to offer academic, analytical-empirical research-led and international education to students within these specialisations in the communication science field. The panel approves of the students being educated to enter the labour market and to find positions in the national or international communication science domain.

The panel appreciates the Joint Disciplinary Framework for Communication Science, which has been drafted by the joint programmes in the Netherlands. The panel considers this framework to be a sound and up-to-date description of the Communication Science domain and of the attainment levels of Bachelor and Master programmes in this domain. The panel regards the objectives of this programme to be clearly aligned with this framework.

The intended learning outcomes are comprehensive, match programme objectives, and meet the master level. The panel proposes to state international, interdisciplinary and broader social sciences' perspectives more explicitly in the intended learning outcomes to align these better to the programme curriculum.

The admission requirements and procedures of the programme are clear and up to standard. The pre-master programme is well-structured and effective.

The curriculum matches the intended learning outcomes. The panel very much appreciates the curriculum contents, courses addressing theory, methodology and research skills in the communication science domain and the programme specialisations. The curriculum is strongly research-oriented, which is appreciated by the panel. The panel considers the curriculum to be very well organised and to be coherent. As the learning goals of some courses may not be very specific and rather extensive, the panel suggests to update the course learning goals in this respect.

The panel considers the lecturers to be highly-qualified instructors. The panel is very positive about the expertise and research track records of the lecturers in the programme. The proportions of them having PhD degrees or being BKO-certified are up to standard. The panel is positive about the lecturers meeting regularly to discuss the programme.

The panel strongly appreciates the programme offering small-scale education and fostering community building within the international classroom among students in the face of large student numbers. The panel is pleased to see the range of study methods offered. The number of hours of face-to-face education and the students-to-staff ratio are adequate. Information provision and study guidance are perceived by the panel to be adequate as well. The curriculum may be intensified in some periods, as students may have time left. The drop-out rates and student success rates of the programme are favourable.

The examinations and assessment rules and regulations of the programme are in line with University of Amsterdam and Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences assessment policies. The Examinations Board monitors the examination and assessment processes appropriately. The panel regards the examination and assessment policies to be well-organised. The panel considers the measures ensuring the validity, reliability and transparency of examinations and assessments to be up to standard.

The examination methods meet the course goals and contents. The panel welcomes the range of examination methods adopted. The measures taken to counter the effects of free-riding, are effective.

The supervision and assessment processes for the Master theses are adequate. The assessment procedures involve two examiners arriving at their assessments independently and adopting assessment scoring forms. As the examiners assess the Master theses entirely separately, the panel proposes to schedule meetings to allow the examiners to discuss the assessments. In addition, the panel proposes to add more elaborate written comments to substantiate the thesis' assessments.

The Master theses match the intended learning outcomes. The theses are regarded by the panel to be up to standard. The panel fully agrees to the grades given by the programme examiners.

The panel considers students completing the programme to have reached the intended learning outcomes and regards the programme to offer suitable preparation for positions in the programme domain. The panel advises to further strengthen the professional field relations.

The panel that conducted the assessment of the Master Communication Science programme of University of Amsterdam assesses this programme to meet the standards of the limited framework, as laid down in the NVAO Assessment framework for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands, judging the programme to be satisfactory. Therefore, the panel advises NVAO to accredit the programme.

Rotterdam, 12 April 2019

Prof. dr. H. Vandebosch
(panel chair)

drs. W. Vercouteren
(panel secretary)

2. Assessment process

The evaluation agency Certiked VBI received the request by University of Amsterdam to coordinate the limited framework programme assessment process for the Master Communication Science programme of this University. This objective of the programme assessment process was to assess whether the programme would conform to the standards of the limited framework, as laid down in the NVAO Assessment framework for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands, published on 20 December 2016 (Staatscourant nr. 69458).

Management of the programmes in the assessment cluster Communication Sciences convened to discuss the composition of the assessment panel and to draft the list of candidates.

Having conferred with management of the University of Amsterdam programme, Certiked invited candidate panel members to sit on the assessment panel. The panel members agreed to do so. The panel composition was as follows:

- Prof. dr. H. Vandebosch, professor Department of Communication Sciences, University of Antwerp (panel chair);
- Prof. dr. A.A. Maes, professor Communication and Cognition, Tilburg University (panel member);
- Prof. dr. T. Smits, professor Faculty of Social Sciences, Leuven University (panel member);
- C.H.W. Buurman, chair Logeion, Netherlands Association for Communication Professionals (panel member);
- E. Bulten MSc, alumna Master Communication, Health and Life Sciences, Wageningen University (student member).

On behalf of Certiked, drs. W. Vercouteren served as the process coordinator and secretary in the assessment process.

All panel members and the secretary confirmed in writing being impartial with regard to the programme to be assessed and observing the rules of confidentiality. Having obtained the authorisation by the University, Certiked requested the approval of NVAO of the proposed panel to conduct the assessment. NVAO has given the approval.

To prepare the assessment process, the process coordinator convened with management of the programme to discuss the outline of the self-assessment report, the subjects to be addressed in this report and the site visit schedule. In addition, the planning of the activities in preparation of the site visit were discussed. In the course of the process preparing for the site visit, programme management and the process coordinator regularly had contact to fine-tune the process. The activities prior to the site visit have been performed as planned. Programme management approved of the site visit schedule.

Well in advance of the site visit date, programme management sent the list of final projects of graduates of the programme of the most recent years. Acting on behalf of the assessment panel, the process coordinator selected fifteen final projects. The grade distribution in the selection was ensured to conform to the grade distribution in the list, sent by programme management.

The panel chair and the panel members were sent the self-assessment report of the programme, including appendices. In the self-assessment report, the student chapter was included. In addition, the expert panel members were forwarded a number of final projects of the programme graduates, these final projects being part of the selection made by the process coordinator.

A number of weeks before the site visit date, the assessment panel chair and the process coordinator met to discuss the self-assessment report provided by programme management, the procedures regarding the assessment process and the site visit schedule. In this meeting, the profile of panel chairs of NVAO was discussed as well. The panel chair was informed about the competencies, listed in the profile. Documents pertaining to a number of these competencies were presented to the panel chair. The meeting between the panel chair and the process coordinator served as the briefing for panel chairs, as meant in the NVAO profile of panel chairs.

Prior to the date of the site visit, all panel members sent in their preliminary findings, based on the self-assessment report and the final projects studied, and a number of questions to be put to the programme representatives on the day of the site visit. The panel secretary summarised this information, compiling a list of questions, which served as a starting point for the discussions with the programme representatives during the site visit.

Shortly before the site visit date, the complete panel met to go over the preliminary findings concerning the quality of the programme. During this preliminary meeting, the preliminary findings of the panel members, including those about the final projects were discussed. The procedures to be adopted during the site visit, including the questions to be put to the programme representatives on the basis of the list compiled, were discussed as well.

On 12 November 2018, the panel conducted the site visit on the University of Amsterdam campus. The site visit schedule was in accordance with the schedule as planned. In a number of separate sessions, panel members were given the opportunity to meet with Faculty representatives, programme management, Examinations Board representatives, lecturers and final projects examiners, and students and alumni.

In a closed session at the end of the site visit, the panel considered every one of the findings, weighed the considerations and arrived at conclusions with regard to the quality of the programme. At the end of the site visit, the panel chair presented a broad outline of the considerations and conclusions to programme representatives.

Clearly separated from the process of the programme assessment, the assessment panel members and programme representatives met to conduct the development dialogue, with the objective to discuss future developments of the programme.

The assessment draft report was finalised by the secretary, having taken into account the findings and considerations of the panel. The draft report was sent to the panel members, who studied it and made a number of changes. Thereupon, the secretary edited the final report. This report was presented to programme management to be corrected for factual inaccuracies. Programme management was given two weeks to respond. Having been corrected for these factual inaccuracies, the Certiked bureau sent the report to the University Board to accompany their request for re-accreditation of this programme.

3. Programme administrative information

Name programme in CROHO: M Communication Science (M Communicatiewetenschap)

Orientation, level programme: Academic Master

Grade: MSc

Number of credits: 60 EC

Specialisations: Corporate Communication
Entertainment Communication
Persuasive Communication
Political Communication

Location: Amsterdam

Mode of study: Full-time (instruction language English)

Registration in CROHO: 66615

Name of institution: University of Amsterdam

Status of institution: Government-funded University

Institution's quality assurance: Approved

4. Findings, considerations and assessments per standard

4.1 Standard 1: Intended learning outcomes

The intended learning outcomes tie in with the level and orientation of the programme; they are geared to the expectations of the professional field, the discipline, and international requirements.

Findings

The Master Communication Science programme is offered by the Department of Communication Science of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of University of Amsterdam. The Dean of the Faculty has the responsibility for all programmes of the Faculty. Within the Department of Communication Science, the director of the Graduate School of Communication is responsible for the organisation, delivery and quality assurance of the Master Communication Science programme. The School also offers the Erasmus Mundus Master Journalism, Media and Globalisation programme and the Research Master Communication Science programme. The Programme Committee for the programme, being composed of equal numbers of lecturers and students, advises programme management on quality issues regarding these programmes. The Examinations Board for both the Bachelor and Master Communication Science programmes has the authority to assure the quality of examinations and assessments of these programmes.

The objectives of the Master Communication Science programme of University of Amsterdam are to study theoretically and empirically the contents, use, and consequences of media and communication in society. Students are educated in knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities to work at academic master level in national and international communications and media organisations or related fields. The programme intends to educate students in one of the specialisations offered within the communication science domain, being the specialisations of corporate communication, entertainment communication, persuasive communication or political communication. The programme aims for academic, research-led and international education of students within these specialisations. The academic orientation of the programme is geared towards theoretical knowledge and understanding of the specialisations. The research orientation of the programme regards knowledge and skills in empirical-analytical research in these specialisations. The specialisations correspond to the research interests of staff lecturing in the programme. The international orientation of the programme is directed towards international substantive or methodological approaches and towards building the international classroom.

The programme objectives are aligned with the requirements of the Joint Disciplinary Framework for Communication Science. This framework has been drafted by the joint Communication Science programmes in the Netherlands. In this framework, the position of the discipline internationally and in the Netherlands, the joint principles of Dutch Communication Science programmes as well as the general objectives and the final attainment levels for Bachelor and Master Communication Science programmes in the Netherlands have been outlined.

The academic, research and international orientations of the programme have been compared in broad outline to programmes in the Netherlands and abroad. The results of this comparison show similarities and differences between the University of Amsterdam programme and other programmes in these terms.

Students are prepared to enter the labour market and for positions in the programme domain. The programme monitors trends in the professional field.

The objectives of the programme have been translated into the programme intended learning outcomes. These intended learning outcomes specify, as main points, up-to-date knowledge and thorough understanding of one of the specialisations offered in the programme; knowledge and understanding of standard research designs and methods; knowledge and skills to do academic research in this field independently; knowledge and skills to analyse complex theoretical, professional or social problems, communication skills; and critical academic attitude.

Programme management compared the intended learning outcomes to the Dublin descriptors for master programmes, to demonstrate these to meet master level requirements.

Considerations

The panel regards the programme objectives to be sound and relevant. The programme profile is clear. The panel welcomes the programme objectives to educate students in the specialisations of either corporate communication, entertainment communication, persuasive communication or political communication. The panel supports the programme intentions to offer academic, analytical-empirical research-led and international education to students within these specialisations in the communication science field.

The panel appreciates the Joint Disciplinary Framework for Communication Science, which has been drafted by the joint programmes in the Netherlands. The panel considers this framework to be a sound and up-to-date description of the Communication Science domain and of the attainment levels of Bachelor and Master programmes in this domain. The panel regards the objectives of this programme to be clearly aligned with this framework.

The panel approves of the students being educated to enter the labour market and to find positions in the national or international communication science domain.

The intended learning outcomes are comprehensive and match the programme objectives. The panel proposes to state international, interdisciplinary and broader social sciences' perspectives more explicitly in the intended learning outcomes to align these better to the programme curriculum. The panel regards the intended learning outcomes to meet the master level.

Assessment of this standard

These considerations have led the assessment panel to assess standard 1, Intended learning outcomes, to be satisfactory.

4.2 Standard 2: Teaching-learning environment

The curriculum, the teaching-learning environment and the quality of the teaching staff enable the incoming students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

Findings

The student influx was about 300 incoming students in 2016 and 2017. In the years before, the numbers were about 340 incoming students. About 30 % of the total inflow are students having completed the Bachelor Communication Science of University of Amsterdam. Another about 30 % of the influx are students from other universities in the Netherlands or with bachelor degrees in other disciplines from University of Amsterdam. About 40 % of the total intake are students originating from abroad. The admission criteria for the programme are the Bachelor Communication Science degree of one of the Dutch universities, or equivalent Bachelor degrees. Applicants with Bachelor degrees in this field but with deficiencies in communication science theory or social sciences methods and techniques, are to take pre-master courses of maximum 30 EC study load. Students with other Bachelor degrees or students coming from higher professional education institutes (hbo) are not admitted. International students are to report appropriate command of English. Applications are screened by the programme Admission Committee.

The programme takes one year to complete and carries 60 EC of study load. The curriculum components have been mapped to the intended learning outcomes to show the curriculum meeting the programme intended learning outcomes. The programme curriculum consists of two specialisation seminars (12 EC each), the research methods course (6 EC), two elective courses (6 EC each), and the Master Thesis seminar (18 EC). The specialisation seminars and the research methods course are scheduled in the first semester, whereas the electives and the Master thesis seminar are placed in the second semester. The specialisation seminars introduce students to one out of four specialisations within communication science, offered in the programme. These courses address theory and research literature in these specialisations. In the research methods course, methodological and statistical knowledge and skills are taught in preparation of the Master Thesis. One of the products at completion of this course is the research design for the thesis. In the elective courses, students may deepen their knowledge and understanding of specific media and communication topics. The Master thesis seminar is composed of three phases. In thesis preparation groups in the first semester, students within the same specialisation draft the thesis proposal, consisting of the research theme, the research question and the research methodology. In the extended thesis proposal in the second semester, students elaborate on this proposal. In the final phase at completion of the curriculum, students collect data, do analyses, and complete the thesis. The subjects addressed in the courses are research-led. Lecturers are researchers in the programme domain and relate subjects to current research. Professional perspectives are offered as well. Lecturers participate in professional networks. Endowed professors and guest lecturers highlight these in courses. Extra-curricular career workshops are offered, introducing students to the professional field and to entrepreneurship opportunities.

A total number of 138 staff members are involved in both the Bachelor and Master Communication Science programmes. They are employees of the Department of Communication Science of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences. Most of the lecturers are researchers in the programme domain, and are members of the Amsterdam School of Communication Research. Research done at this School is highly valued. Some of the lectures are only involved in education. About 75 % of the staff members have PhD degrees. More than 90 % of the lecturers are BKO-certified, testifying to their educational capabilities. Lecturers meet regularly in staff meetings to discuss the programme. Within courses, lecturers meet to align the teaching. The students appreciate the lecturers.

The programme educational concept is to promote students' self-directed learning, to foster students' academic attitude and to contribute to the international classroom. Students are expected to prepare classes, to complete homework and assignments, and to meet deadlines. Students are invited to explore and critically assess subjects in this field. Tutorials are the predominant study method adopted in the programme. In tutorials, students discuss topics, work on small-scale assignments and give presentations. The students-to-staff ratio for the programme is about 30/1. The class sizes in the tutorials range from 15 to 25 students. The number of hours of face-to-face education is 240 hours over the whole of the curriculum, leading to about 6 hours per week. These hours are primarily hours spent in courses. In the last two phases of the Master thesis seminar, face-to-face hours constitute individual guidance. Students in the programme are on a regular basis informed about programme-related subjects, among which choosing the specialisation. Students may turn to one of the three study advisers in case of questions or study problems. The programme drop-out rates over the years amount to about 6 % of all students. The student success rates of the programme for the last cohorts are on average 67 % after one year and on average 91 % after two years.

Considerations

The admission requirements and procedures of the programme are clear and up to standard. The pre-master programme is well-structured and effective.

The curriculum matches the intended learning outcomes. The panel very much appreciates the curriculum contents, courses addressing theory, methodology and research skills in the communication science domain and the programme specialisations. The curriculum is strongly research-oriented, which is appreciated by the panel. The panel considers the curriculum to be very well organised and to be coherent. As the learning goals of some courses may not be very specific and rather extensive, the panel suggests to update the course learning goals in this respect.

The panel considers the lecturers to be highly-qualified instructors. The panel is very positive about the expertise and research track records of the lecturers in the programme. The proportions of lecturers having PhD degrees or being BKO-certified are up to standard. Within the courses, junior lecturers and PhD candidates are well-guided by senior staff members. The panel is positive about the lecturers meeting regularly to discuss the programme.

The panel strongly appreciates the programme offering small-scale education and fostering community building within the international classroom among students in the face of large student numbers. The panel is pleased to see the range of study methods offered, these meeting the course contents. The number of hours of face-to-face education and the students-to-staff ratio are adequate. Information provision and study guidance are perceived by the panel to be adequate as well. The curriculum may be intensified in some periods, as students may have time left. The drop-out rates and student success rates of the programme are favourable.

Assessment of this standard

These considerations have led the assessment panel to assess standard 2, Teaching-learning environment, to be good.

4.3 Standard 3: Student assessment

The programme has an adequate system of student assessment in place.
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Findings

The programme examination and assessment rules and regulations are in line with the University of Amsterdam and the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences assessment policies. The Examinations Board has the authority to monitor the quality of examination and assessment processes and products of the programme.

The examination methods for the courses are selected to conform to the course goals and contents. The examination methods vary to allow for different course goals to be tested. The examination methods in the programme include written examinations, written assignments, research proposals or reports, literature reviews, and oral presentations. To assure the assessment of students' individual performances, individual examinations within courses constitute at least 70 % of the final grades for the courses.

The rules and regulations for the Master thesis have been laid down in the Master thesis guide & assessment procedure. The projects are individual research projects. Students are entitled to individual guidance by the supervisor, who is one of the staff members. The supervisor assesses the extended thesis proposal after the second phase of the Master thesis seminar. The supervisor and the second examiner, who also is one of the staff members, separately assess the final Master thesis. For the assessment, assessment scoring forms are adopted. If their assessments differ more than 1.0 point or if one of them assesses the thesis unsatisfactory or more than 8.0, they are to reach agreement on the final grade. If agreement is not reached, the Thesis Quality Committee Master chair will determine the grade.

Programme management and the Examinations Board have taken a number of measures to promote the validity, reliability and transparency of examinations and assessments. The Examinations Board appoints examiners. The requirements for examiners are to have relevant PhD degrees and to be BKO-certified. For all courses, course files have been compiled. These include, among others, course goals, examination methods, and assessment matrices to specify relations between course goals and all examinations. Draft examinations are peer-reviewed by fellow examiners. On the yearly assessment day, examiners meet to discuss examinations. The programme Course Catalogue provides students with information about the examination methods and grading schemes of the courses. On behalf of the Examinations Board, the Examinations Review Committee, chaired by the assessment coordinator, inspects the course files and reviews the course examinations. For the Examinations Board, the Thesis Quality Committee Master reviews samples of Master theses. Rules and regulations to prevent fraud and plagiarism are in force. Students are informed. The Examinations Board handles cases.

Considerations

The panel approves of the examinations and assessment rules and regulations of the programme, these being in line with University of Amsterdam and Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences assessment policies. The Examinations Board monitors the examination and assessment processes appropriately. The panel regards the examination and assessment policies to be well-organised.

The examination methods in the programme are consistent with the course goals and contents. The panel welcomes the wide range of examination methods adopted. The measures taken to counter the effects of free-riding, are effective.

The supervision and assessment processes for the Master theses are adequate. Students are provided with well-organised supervision. The assessment procedures are adequate as well, involving two examiners arriving at their assessments independently and adopting assessment scoring forms. As the examiners assess the Master theses entirely separately, the panel proposes to schedule meetings to allow the examiners to discuss the assessments. In addition, the panel proposes to add more elaborate written comments to substantiate the thesis' assessments.

The panel considers the measures ensuring the validity, reliability and transparency of examinations and assessments to be up to standard. Course files, peer review of examinations and assessment days may be mentioned as evidence. The regular review of examinations and Master theses is also perceived as positive by the panel.

Assessment of this standard

The considerations have led the assessment panel to assess standard 3, Student assessment, to be satisfactory.

4.4 Standard 4: Achieved learning outcomes

The programme demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.

Findings

The final Master theses of the programme are individual research projects. In the theses, students are to demonstrate having reached all the intended learning outcomes of the programme. In addition, students show being able to conduct individual research independently, covering the empirical cycle. The average grades for the Master theses in the last two year were 7.3. The panel studied Master theses of fifteen programme graduates of the most recent years.

The programme surveyed programme graduates' views on the programme and their careers. Graduates are generally very content about the programme (score 7.9 out of 10). The programme graduates nearly all have paid work. Many graduates indicated having found appropriate academic-level positions within two or three months after graduation. They have found positions in the communications policy or strategy field, in media or market research or as information officers, journalists, public relations managers or consultants.

As has been said, students are acquainted with the professional field in the programme. The Advisory Council of the programme, consisting of professional field representatives, meets on a regular basis with programme management to align the programme to professional field requirements.

Considerations

The Master theses the panel studied, match the intended learning outcomes. The theses are regarded by the panel to be up to standard. The panel fully agrees to the grades given by the programme examiners.

The panel considers students completing the programme to have reached the intended learning outcomes and regards the programme to offer suitable preparation for positions in the programme domain.

Although the programme prepares students for the professional field, the panel advises to strengthen the professional field relations.

Assessment of this standard

The considerations have led the assessment panel to assess standard 4, Achieved learning outcomes, to be satisfactory.

5. Overview of assessments

Standard	Assessment
Standard 1. Intended learning outcomes	Satisfactory
Standard 2: Teaching-learning environment	Good
Standard 3: Student assessment	Satisfactory
Standard 4: Achieved learning outcomes	Satisfactory
Programme	Satisfactory

6. Recommendations

In this report, a number of recommendations by the panel have been listed. For the sake of clarity, these have been brought together below. These panel recommendations are the following.

- To address international, interdisciplinary and broader social sciences' perspectives in the programme intended learning outcomes more explicitly.
- To update the learning goals of some courses to make them less extensive and more specific.
- To intensify the curriculum in some periods, as students may have time left.
- To add more elaborate written comments to substantiate the Master Thesis assessments.
- To schedule meetings between the Master Thesis examiners to allow them to discuss the assessments.
- To further strengthen professional field relations.