



Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences

Re-assessment International Business and Languages

Limited Programme Assessment

Summary

In December 2018, an NQA audit panel conducted a re-assessment of the existing professional bachelor's programme in International Business and Languages (IBL) of Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences (RUAS). The original assessment of this programme took place in November 2017. Although Standard 1, 2 and 3 of the limited programme assessment were originally assessed as satisfactory, the assessment on Standard 4 (*achieved learning outcomes*) was unsatisfactory and led to an overall assessment of satisfactory (with conditions).

After an improvement period of one year an NQA audit panel revisited the programme on 18 December 2018 to assess the quality of Standard 4. The panel concludes that the programme has implemented a series of improvement measures that adequately respond to the recommendations made in 2017. The aim of a first category of measures is to equip students better for their thesis research, amongst other things by improving their research skills. A second category transforms the procedures for thesis supervision, assessment and quality assurance. As part of this, supervisors are better prepared for their role. A third category of measures is intended to ensure that graduation companies offer students a suitable environment for carrying out their research. Finally, the aim of a number of additional measures is (amongst other things) to guarantee a suitable end level for the language component of the programme. Having reviewed the documentation and spoken to programme representatives, the panel is convinced that effective and profound changes have been put into motion. Already, the panel found the prevailing culture within the programme transformed, with staff members now operating as a team that is committed to offering students a high quality programme.

To re-assess the achieved learning outcomes, the panel studied fifteen theses that were completed in 2018, with grades ranging from 5.6 to 8.1. Overall, the panel is positive about the results, which show particular progress in terms of the match between the management issue and the methodology used to address this. All of the theses in the sample meet the required end level for a professional bachelor's programme. The fact that some are (much) stronger than others is – on the whole – accurately reflected in the grades. Without wanting to detract from this positive result, the panel also identified a number of aspects that are in need of further improvement, notably the subject choice, which does not always seem closely linked to international business, the use of quantitative methods and the application of the APA style sheet. The panel was pleased to find that supervisors, and staff in general, fully agree that more action is needed on these particular (as well as some other) aspects. The panel expects that over time the full effects of the improvement that started in 2018 will become visible. It appreciates all that the programme has achieved thus far.

The panel assesses standard 4 as **satisfactory**, which leads to an overall assessment of **satisfactory**.

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Introduction

This report presents the outcome of the re-assessment of the existing study programme in International Business and Languages (IBL) that is offered by Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences (RUAS) as part of the Rotterdam Business School (RBS).

During the limited programme assessment that took place in November 2017, the NQA audit panel assessed Standard 4 (*achieved learning outcomes*) as 'unsatisfactory', leading to an overall assessment of 'satisfactory (with conditions)'. For the programme to qualify for reaccreditation after a recovery period, the panel considered the following improvements necessary:

1. Strengthening the research skills of the students by providing research training that develops their problem-solving skills and stimulates creativity; the effects should be visible in a strong substantiation of the methodology part of the thesis.
2. Equipping supervisors for their role by offering them appropriate opportunities to expand their knowledge of relevant research methods; this will help them to support students in an effective manner.
3. Guaranteeing that the graduation company offers a suitable environment for conducting a high-level research project that is clearly delineated and demonstrates methodological rigour.

Following this outcome, the study programme submitted an improvement plan to the NVAO (29 March 2018), in which it listed a number of remedial actions. This plan was approved by the NVAO (26 June 2018) and as a result the accreditation period was extended to 1 January 2020. Although the NVAO granted the programme the usual two-year recovery period, in its improvement plan the programme clearly stated its intention to limit the recovery period to one year. For obvious reasons the programme preferred to deal with the outcomes of the IBL assessment before becoming part of the new International Business (IB) CROHO label, which is scheduled for a first assessment in February 2019.

Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences asked NQA to carry out the necessary re-assessment, which took place on 18 December 2018. The re-assessment was limited to Standard 4 of the NVAO's Assessment framework for the higher education system of the Netherlands (September 2016). Some of the panel's recommendations to improve thesis quality, however, had implications that reached beyond Standard 4. Therefore, remedial actions that concerned Standard 2 (*teaching-learning environment*) and Standard 3 (*assessment*) were also considered in the panel's final assessment.

The panel that conducted the re-assessment was almost identical to the panel that originally assessed the programme in November 2017. The panel was composed in consultation with Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences. Preceding the site visit it was approved by the NVAO.

The audit panel for this re-assessment consisted of:

D.J.N.M. Rijnders MSc (panel chair)

Dr A.G.M. Koet (domain expert)

V.J.M. Guyt MSc (domain expert)

Dr F. Meijer, external NQA-auditor, acted as secretary of the panel.

As part of the re-assessment, the audit panel studied a number of documents, including final products of fifteen students that graduated in 2018 and a self-evaluation report written by the programme (see Appendix 1). On 18 December 2018 the panel revisited the programme and conducted interviews with the management, staff members (including staff members responsible for thesis supervision and assessment), students, alumni and the Board of Examiners (see Appendix 2). The information provided by the programme (both orally and in writing) enabled the panel to reach a well-considered judgement.

In the following chapter the re-assessment of Standard 4 is presented. This chapter is followed by the general conclusion on the degree programme as a whole and two appendices.

The panel declares that the assessment of the study programme was carried out independently.

Utrecht, 23 January 2019

Panel chair



D.J.N.M. Rijnders MSc

Lead auditor



Dr F. Meijer

Standard 4 Achieved learning outcomes

The programme demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.

In this chapter the audit panel describes the findings, considerations and conclusions on the achieved learning outcomes. This standard is assessed as **satisfactory**.

Conclusion

To assess the achieved learning outcomes, the panel studied fifteen theses that were completed in 2018. It concludes that these theses meet the criteria for the professional bachelor's level. Improvement measures that were launched over the past year resulted in students being better prepared for their thesis research, properly assisted by qualified supervisors and fairly assessed by means of well-designed procedures. A tell-tale sign of improvement is that the current thesis subjects are generally more clearly defined than before and that the research methods used are better suited to the management issues put forward by the companies. While the overall level of the recently completed theses in the sample certainly surpasses that of previously studied theses, the panel notes that it will take some (more) time for the improvement measures to come into full effect. Issues that persist in the current theses (notably with respect to topic selection, quantitative research skills and referencing) are expected to be resolved as students are offered more extensive research training, as supervisors become more comfortable in their role and when the new quality culture within the programme matures. All in all, the panel is confident that the programme is developing in the right direction. It was very pleased to find that nothing less than a culture shift had taken place within the programme since its last visit, bringing new optimism, enthusiasm and energy to all those involved.

Considerations

Results of the previous assessment

In 2017, the panel visited a programme that was clearly in transition. An important development was that IBL was preparing to become part of the new programme in International Business (IB), starting in September 2018. As part of this conversion, the programme was in the process of rethinking its profile, objectives and curriculum. Internal conditions within the programme were somewhat difficult. The years leading up to the assessment had seen a rapid succession of management teams, leading to a general feeling of unrest amongst staff. At the same time, student numbers were rapidly increasing, which put pressure on the still fairly traditional teaching-learning environment. While the programme convincingly demonstrated that it was inherently forward-looking, the panel found that conditions within the programme were not always such that ambitions could be turned into successful results. This particularly pertained to the level and content of the final products of the programme.

Although the panel was convinced that alumni generally performed well on the labour market, a significant number of theses were found to reach insufficient depth and fall short in their use of theory and methodology. Moreover, the panel concluded that the thesis format itself was rather restrictive, with students conforming to a certain format (i.e. export plan, international marketing plan, international communication plan etc.) rather than focusing on the company's problem and basing their research choices on the issue at hand. A related issue was that students clearly found it difficult to navigate the divergent expectations of the graduation company on the one

hand and of the supervisors on the other. Finally, the level of language proficiency reached by students was satisfactory, but did not necessarily correspond to the high ambitions of the programme as expressed in its intended learning outcomes. These conclusions led the panel to recommend (1) further strengthening the research training provided to students, (2) better equipping supervisors by expanding their knowledge of relevant research methods and (3) introducing procedures for ensuring that the graduation company offers a suitable environment for carrying out a high-level research project. In the panel's assessment report, these recommendations were presented as preconditions for a positive reaccreditation advice following an improvement period.

Improvement measures

After the publication of the report, in January 2018, the programme lost no time in introducing a series of measures intended to remedy the shortcomings identified by the panel. A new cohort of students was scheduled to start their theses in February 2018, which meant that – during the first half of 2018 – measures had to be devised and implemented 'on the go', keeping pace with the thesis progress of students. At the same time the programme had to ensure that students from the previous cohort, whose completion was – for some reason or other – delayed, would also benefit from remedial actions and conform to the higher standard of research that was now expected. A second and final phase in the remedial efforts commenced in September 2018, when a new cohort of students started their final year. Building on the experiences of the first half of 2018, the programme implemented a more structural series of measures, which are intended to serve as the long-term basis for better thesis results.

After reviewing all of the improvement measures, the panel feels that its recommendations with respect to the quality improvement of final products have been adequately dealt with. A first category of recent measures deals with improving the research training provided to students. An important part of this is the revision of the research courses, which now include (more) attention for critical thinking and proper research methodology. Furthermore, the (research) project in year 3 has been positioned as a stepping-stone towards the thesis. Students of the 2017-2018 cohort of fourth-year students, who were already too far in the programme to benefit from these revisions, were given an impromptu three-day crash course in research design as they started their thesis research in the spring of 2018. A more substantial series of workshops, starting with a September kick-off meeting, was organized for the current cohort of fourth-year students. Another useful measure that was introduced to ensure that students are off to a good start with their research, is that the proposed research question and plan of approach now have to be approved by a thesis committee. The panel was pleased to learn that the preordained thesis format was dropped, thereby encouraging a better fit between the company's problem and the solutions proposed by the student. To promote a narrower, more research-driven, focus some of the intended learning outcomes that had previously been covered by the thesis have been transferred to other curriculum components, where they are assessed at end level. Efforts to increase cooperation with the Business Innovation Centre at Rotterdam Business School (RBS), as the panel proposed in its 2018 report, are still underway. In order to further fortify the foundations of research in the IBL curriculum, the panel hopes that the programme succeeds in involving more of its staff in the research of this centre.

A second category of measures targets the quality of thesis supervision and assessment. To start with, the programme ensured that supervisors are properly trained, by organizing calibration

sessions and seminars on research methods, and by requiring supervisors to obtain a basic qualification for examination (in Dutch: *Basis Kwalificatie Examinering*, BKE). Another helpful change is that mechanisms for external validation of thesis results were introduced. Also, the Board of Examiners was reorganized and asked to actively monitor the quality of graduates by annually analysing samples of theses, as well as other products at end level. This combination of strengthening the quality of supervisors, introducing external validation and empowering the Board of Examiners, the panel believes, is an effective way of enhancing the quality of theses. A supporting measure is the adjustment of the assessment rubric: all rubric parts now have to be assessed sufficient in order for the student to pass. The panel also applauds the fact that thesis procedures have become less bureaucratic, now that the number of forms involved and the number of annexes to the thesis manual have been reduced. It does, however, believe that one single form would suffice.

In line with the panel's third recommendation, measures were also taken to ensure a good match between the student and the graduation company. This, first of all, involved the appointment of a new graduation coordinator, who was instructed to closely monitor the suitability of graduation companies chosen by students. Secondly, the programme as a whole intends to foster long-term relations with companies that match the programme's profile (e.g. Danone, Decathlon) so as to expand the range of high-quality placement opportunities available to students. Another, highly practical, measure is that an RBS-wide leaflet was produced to communicate prevailing requirements to the companies.

Finally, the panel was pleased to find that the language requirements have been brought to realistic end levels (C1 for English, B2 for the additional 'high level' language and B1 for the 'medium level language') and that students that perform well are now given the opportunity to take external exams. To improve the language level in the theses, the programme has developed an academic writing course, which is included in the first year of the new IB curriculum.

Measures taken by the programme were not limited to the actions described above. The panel notes that its recommendations with respect to non-thesis related issues were also taken up in a prompt and effective manner. All in all, the panel is impressed with the scale of change that was realized in a relatively short period. It feels that those involved deserve a sincere compliment for their commitment and hard work. The fact that staff members supported the findings in the 2018 report and recognized the need for change has undoubtedly been a major success factor. Likewise, the panel was pleased to learn from the interviews that the improvement period is widely seen as a formative experience for the programme. Previously, staff members were used to a rather hierarchical culture, in which they found it difficult to speak out. Over the past year, however, individual staff members came together as a team and jointly took up the responsibility for quality improvement. This clearly gave rise to new enthusiasm and energy. Also worth mentioning is the positive role of the interim management, which, according to staff members, played a major part in facilitating this positive development. The panel is fully aware that students, especially those who had to complete their theses in the first half of 2018, had a hard time dealing with the changes that were presented to them. It is therefore understandable that they expressed some dissatisfaction during the site visit as well as in the student chapter of the self-evaluation report. The panel is, however, convinced that their discomfort was limited to a relatively short period in the spring of 2018. Students who started their final year in September 2018 were altogether much more positive about the thesis preparation that they received.

Furthermore, they confirmed that thesis procedures and guidelines are now much clearer than in the year before.

Products of graduates

To assess the achieved learning outcomes, the panel examined a sample of fifteen theses (and associated assessment forms) that were completed in 2018, with grades ranging from 5.6 to 8.1. Twelve of the theses were produced by students who had started their thesis research in early 2018 and therefore benefited from the first round of improvement measures, introduced between February and June 2018. Three other theses were produced by students of the previous cohort, who had started their research under the 'old' system but whose completion had been delayed. This meant that each of the three panel members read four 'new' theses and one 'old' thesis, giving them the opportunity to compare the level and ascertain that both categories of students realized a sufficient end result.

Overall, the panel is positive about the level of quality that these theses represent. It agrees that all of the theses in the sample, both old and new, deserve the pass grades they received – even if in some cases this took quite a bit of effort from the students and supervisors involved. The panel was, furthermore, pleased to read a number of strong theses that were generally well written and sufficiently in-depth. It is also content with the level of the grading. Grades were found to reflect the quality of the theses adequately and were – most of the times – sufficiently motivated.

While it is unrealistic to expect all of the measures described above to pay off after just one year, their effects are certainly beginning to show. One obvious change for the better is that theses now deal with a wider range of subjects and that research methods are more attuned to the needs of the company. Putting more emphasis on the 'management issue' has helped students to think about 'the question behind the question', thereby honing their critical thinking skills and creativity. Something for the programme to consider in the coming period is which types of management issues are specifically relevant for the IBL domain. As some of the theses address subjects that are apparently not directly related to international business, it might be worthwhile to develop criteria for what constitutes a suitable thesis subject. Two other issues that deserve further attention are the quantitative research skills of students and correct use of the APA style sheet. Conversations during the site visit confirmed that thesis supervisors are well aware of the continuing importance of these issues. The panel was convinced that staff members are fully committed to further improving the research training of students and it is therefore confident that upcoming cohorts of students will be able to benefit from more thorough instruction on topic selection, proper (quantitative) methodology and correct referencing.

General conclusion on the study programme

Assessment of the standards

The audit panel comes to the following judgements with regard to the standards:

Standard	Assessment
<i>Standard 1 Intended learning outcomes</i>	Satisfactory
<i>Standard 2 Teaching-learning environment</i>	Satisfactory
<i>Standard 3 Assessment</i>	Satisfactory
<i>Standard 4 Achieved learning outcomes</i>	Satisfactory

Considerations and conclusion

Just over a year after the previous assessment, the panel encountered a programme that is in the process of wide-ranging change. Issues that troubled the programme in the past have been, or are being, dealt with in an energetic manner. This does not only mean that concrete measures have been taken to safeguard the end level of current students, but also that more structural changes are being made to prevent a recurrence of quality loss in the future. During the site visit, the panel met with staff members who now operate as a team and put the best interest of the programme and its students first. Furthermore, the panel found that positive changes are not limited to IBL, but also have an effect on RBS as a whole, and especially on those programmes with which IBL cooperates under the International Business umbrella. This, according to the panel, is the best possible outcome of the 2017 assessment.

Considering that all standards meet the criteria for reaccreditation, the audit panel assesses the quality of the professional bachelor's programme in International Business and Languages as **satisfactory**.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Documents examined

Standard documents

- Overview of graduates 2018;
- Thesis Manual 2017-2018;
- Thesis Manual 2018-2019;
- Assessment plan 2018-2019;
- Teaching and Exam Regulations RBS (*Onderwijs en Examen Regeling, OER*).

Additional documents

- Leaflet 'A graduation assignment in your company';
- Assessor instructions thesis;
- Educational Vision RBS;
- Internship Guide;
- Schedule for examiners to take the BKE and SKE courses.

Appendix 2 Programme for the site visit

PROGRAMMA VISITATIE HERSTELBEOORDELING IBL, 18 december 2018 RUIMTE PL.07.120	
09.00 – 09.15	Ontvangst
09.15 – 10.30	Vorbereiding en materiaalbestudering door NQA-panel
10.30 – 11.00	Vragen totstandkoming beoordeling twee eindwerken 2 beoordelaars:
11.00 – 11.30	Presentatie herstelproces 1 Docent: 2 Toeschouwers:
11.30 – 12.00	Management (2 personen)
12.00 – 12.30	Examencommissie (3 personen)
12.30 – 13.00	Lunch

13.00 – 13.45

**Gesprek afgestudeerden (alumni)
en studenten**

4 Alumni:

5 Studenten:

13.45 – 14.30	Gesprek Docenten 6 Docenten:
14.30 – 15.15	Bezinning panel
15.15 – 15.30	Feedback sessie