Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences
Faculty of Digital Media and Creative Industries

Advisory Report to NVAO

Master Digital Design
CROHO: 49131

*** FINAL ***

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SUMMARY JUDGEMENT

This report covers the external assessment of the Master programme Digital Design offered by the Faculty of Digital Media and Creative Industries at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. This one-year 60 ECTS Master of Science degree is offered since 2017 and enables students to develop their design competences in order to work on complex projects in interdisciplinary and multicultural teams.

The panel of international experts performing the assessment followed the standards set by the limited accreditation framework of NVAO. In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, the visit was held online on 28 February 2022. Taking into account its findings and considerations on both the written materials and the discussions, the panel established that the programme meets all four standards. Concluding positively on the overall quality of the programme, the panel issues a positive advice to NVAO on the Master Digital Design at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences.

According to the panel, the Master Digital Design is an exceptional programme in the Netherlands that attracts diverse student cohorts, develops critical and ethical designers, strikes a fair balance between practice and theoretical underpinning, and emphasises the importance of reflective practice and self-directed learning. The competence-based approach is very much at the centre of what the Master Digital Design stands for: it is visible in the profile and learning outcomes of the programme, as well as in its curriculum, teaching model and assessment format. The programme team have a clear rationale and pedagogical choices to deliver on these ambitions, which are evidenced through the work of the students and alumni during the study and in their professional career.

The teaching and learning environment is very well developed. The curriculum structure is robust and the studio model integrating lectures, project work, assignments and self-directed projects provides a holistic and authentic learning experience. The panel thinks highly of the international and multicultural dimension of the programme and endorses the decision to deliver and teach the Master Digital Design in English. The team are competent, as well as committed to the programme, staff and the students, and demonstrated this in maintaining a robust learning experience during the pandemic. The panel recognised a genuine, responsive culture in the programme team, listening to and following up on the feedback and recommendations of students, professionals and the midterm review panel.

The Master Digital Design has developed a rigorous assessment system that befits both the profile of the programme and its educational approach. The panel reviewed a sample of project work evaluations and was impressed by the quality and the care with which assessments are performed and evaluations are reported. Moreover, the assessment quality is effectively monitored by a competent and committed Examination Board.

Finally, the panel identified the quality of the project works, which reflect the vision and objectives of the Master Digital Design and demonstrate the breadth and depth of what students have explored and learned during the 12 month programme. Moreover, alumni are creative, critical and ethical designers with good soft skills who find relevant positions in the professional field.

In addition to its above-mentioned appreciations, the panel identified a number of elements that would enhance the programme quality, but noticed at the same time that most of these ideas are under consideration or already addressed by the programme team. The panel encourages the programme to :

- enhance its communication in order to avoid misalignment between what the programme stands for and what some (potential) students and (interested) cooperation partners expect;
- develop a more diverse network of professional organisations, agencies and collaborators;
- include within the curriculum business skills to further support student projects;
- offer a wider range of theory and models directing and encouraging students to explore;
- ensure an earlier and more in-depth onboarding of all students;
- include more formative assessment points throughout the year;
- look into the training, preparation and certification of its external assessors.

The chair and the secretary of the panel hereby declare that all panel members have studied this report and that they agree with the judgements laid down in the report. They confirm that the assessment has been conducted in accordance with the demands relating to independence.

On behalf of the external assessment panel,

Dr Heather Robson   Mark Delmartino MA
Chair   Secretary

Date: 1 April 2022

INTRODUCTION

This document reports on the external assessment of the Master programme Digital Design (MDD) offered by the Faculty of Digital Media and Creative Industries (FMDCI) at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS). The one-year 60 ECTS Master of Science degree enables students to develop their design competencies in order to work on complex projects in interdisciplinary and multicultural teams. The MDD was initially accredited in 2016-2017 and started in September 2017. In January 2021, the programme underwent a midterm review. The results were positive, and the feedback received encouraged MDD to undertake the reaccreditation as planned in 2022. Administrative data on the institution and the programme are listed in Annex 1.

To establish the quality of this master programme from an NVAO perspective, the panel has followed the Assessment Framework for the Higher Education Accreditation System of the Netherlands, which is described in the NVAO publication of September 2018. As AUAS has received accreditation at institutional level, its programmes can be assessed according to the limited evaluation framework of NVAO, which consists of four standards: intended learning outcomes, teaching-learning environment, student assessment and achieved learning outcomes. Given that this is the first external assessment since its initial accreditation, MDD is not part of the pilot of the Dutch Ministry of Higher Education which allows AUAS to have only standards 1 and 4 externally assessed and validated by NVAO.

The assessment was performed by a panel featuring a chair, three members and one student member and was accompanied by an NVAO-certified secretary. The panel, which was approved by NVAO, consisted of:
- Dr Heather Robson (UK), chair
- Cecilia Scolaro (IT/NL), member
- Imara Felkers (NL), member
- Martijn Arts (NL), member
- Romy Koppert (NL/SE), student-member

The panel was accompanied by Mark Delmartino (BE), a NVAO-certified secretary who liaised between the panel and the programme and ensured that the visit complied with NVAO procedures. All members and the secretary signed a statement of independence and confidentiality. Annex 2 contains a brief curriculum vitae of the panel members.

Given that the preparations for the accreditation started during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the programme decided upfront that the site visit would take place online. Prior to the visit, the panel chair and the external secretary discussed the set-up of the accreditation, as well as the role of the chair and the site visit programme. The secretary was in contact with MDD representatives to work out the programme of the site visit (presented in Annex 3) and to

agree on the materials to be made available (listed in Annex 4). The final arrangements were validated by the panel chair.

In order to allow the panel to prepare for its assessment tasks, the programme produced a Self-Evaluation Report providing relevant background information on the programme and addressing extensively the issues covered by the four NVAO standards. The report moreover explains how the current programme is both a continuation and a development from the initial accreditation phase and how it is/will be taking into account the findings and recommendations of the midterm review.

The NVAO standard on achieved learning outcomes was tested among others by examining a sample of end level products. The panel secretary organised this review with the programme representatives and supported the panel members in their work. In line with the NVAO requirements, the panel reviewed the graduation projects of fifteen students who graduated between September 2019 and August 2021. Based on a list of 71 entries, the chair and secretary selected 15 projects who had obtained a variety of scores.

In the run-up to the site visit, the panel members reviewed the self-evaluation report and the sample of graduation projects, and reported their findings in writing to the panel secretary. These first impressions were compiled in a discussion note which served as a basis for the panel's preparatory meeting, which was held online on 21 February 2022. During this meeting the panel compared its findings, discussed the quality of the graduation projects and their evaluation forms, and identified key questions for the respective online site visit sessions.

The online visit took place on 28 February 2022. At the end of the visit, the chair informed the programme representatives of the main findings of the panel. The visit schedule featured an open consultation hour for MDD students, teaching and support staff; eventually nobody made use of this opportunity to speak individually and confidentially with the panel. Given the packed schedule of the one-day visit, it was decided to hold the Development Dialogue separately at a later date, after this external assessment report has been finalised.

After the site visit, the secretary wrote a draft version of this report and circulated it to the panel for review and feedback. The comments of the panel members were incorporated in a pre-final version, which was validated by the chair. The final draft was sent to AUAS for a check on factual errors on 1 April 2022. The feedback from the institution and the programme was discussed in the panel that modified the text where it thought this was appropriate. The chair then established the final version of this report, which was sent to AUAS on 21 April 2022.

PROGRAMME ASSESSMENT

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.

Profile

The MDD is a full-time one-year 60 ECTS master programme targeting bachelor graduates with a variety of backgrounds. It aims to merge the students' existing sensibility for design and aesthetics with a deeper understanding of the cultural and technological context in which designers operate and of the consequences of their work on society. Throughout the programme, students develop their design competences in order to work on complex projects in interdisciplinary and multicultural teams.

The panel was informed that MDD is an integral part of the programme portfolio at AUAS' Faculty of Digital Media and Creative Industries featuring bachelor and master programmes with interdisciplinary study options in the fields of media, communication, computer science and fashion: FDMCI offers among others an associate degree Frontend Design and Development and a bachelor degree Communication in Multimedia Design. Furthermore, the panel gathered from the discussions that both FDMCI and MDD pay considerable attention to the connection between education and (practice-based) research in the framework of research labs (such as Crossmedia) and professorships (lectoraten). According to the panel, MDD is well embedded in the vision, the priorities and the portfolio of the faculty.

The panel also noted from the very informative benchmarking section in the self-evaluation report that there is no applied master programme with similar contents in the Netherlands. While several programmes have similar titles, these are either offered in Dutch or lead to an MA degree. MDD is an English-language programme leading to a Master of Science degree which emphasises processes over products and highlights evidence-based design decisions that are informed by theory and research. The panel understood from the discussions that the initial decision to offer MDD as an MSc degree is still very much supported by the Faculty: it not only aligns with the orientation of other degrees in FDMCI but MDD's emphasis on the Design process recognising the relationship between process and outcome, also allows to target a wide variety of students.

Since its initial accreditation, the profile of the programme has not changed: MDD still adopts an ethical approach to design and is integrating both academic and professional knowledge. If anything, the attention to – and awareness of - the social, cultural and economic effects of design are emphasised (even) more. The panel noted with satisfaction that the programme wants to stay at the forefront of the ethical turn of digital design. The programme team is proud – and according to the panel deservedly so – on how MDD emphasises ethical and critical thinking in the professional field of design. The panel welcomed the commitment by MDD to embed in

the programme the Sustainability and Inclusivity principles of AUAS. The panel is convinced that the professional profile of MDD graduates does not only fit the needs of digital design industry but also answers an urgent societal call for more ethically and politically aware designers. In this regard, panel members found that the pedagogical and philosophical approach of the programme has been developed to meet this need. The way MDD is developing digital designers now and for the future is both timely and of critical importance in today's global society, and that the emphasis on the social effects of design is of high importance and relevance in forming the professionals of the future, cognisant of an ever-changing field of Design.

Furthermore, the panel thought MDD has a particularly relevant profile because of its collaboration and synergy with industry, its synthesis of theory and practice and its international orientation. In sum, it is a very solid and well-thought-out programme that is inspiring, challenging and providing the tools to become a good quality designer. MDD is particularly attractive because it uses design practice and reflective practice in lots of different cases thereby using design to elicit change for the better. The panel supports MDD's decision to collaborate wider with enterprise and entrepreneurship in the 'bootcamp' programme.

The self-evaluation report indicated that there have been misalignments between student expectations and the profile / learning objectives / delivery of the programme. The discussions with students, alumni and professional field confirmed that at several occasions, some students and some design agencies offering student projects had different expectations regarding the contents of the programme and the qualifications of the students, respectively. According to the panel, the discussions have shown that the cause of this misalignment is not so much the rationale / profile of the programme, but a number of factors including communication, shared expectations, diversity of partners and the complexity of the field and the industry. The panel noted – and the programme management acknowledged – that there is room for more effective communication on the website, in the programme publicity, during the selection of students, in the relations with partner agencies and throughout the programme itself. Representatives of the most recent student cohort indicated that the communication has become better and that most students by now know what they sign up for. Similar echoes came from the design agencies who acknowledge the variety of competences of incoming students.

The panel agrees with the programme management that the geographical, cultural and educational diversity of students is a unique feature of MDD, which should be preserved. The panel also thinks that MDD does very well in connecting students with different voices in industry and in showing the full spectrum of what digital design can mean in professional practice. Hence, it recommends the programme to keep doing what it already started before: better and more communication, being as transparent as possible on all different information channels, and continue to provide clarifications in order to create realistic expectations among both students, organisations, collaborators and partner agencies.

Intended learning outcomes

The section on the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) is extensively described in the self-evaluation report. The panel noted that the ILOs consist of four elements, which in terms of

substance have not changed since the initial accreditation. Their formulation has been simplified and the emphasis on the social effects of design has been made more explicit. The panel appreciates the substance of the ILOs with their focus on framing, identification, expression and co-creation. Moreover, the ILOs reflect the ongoing shifts and needs in the design space and in this way focus on the key elements all design professionals should be made aware of.

The programme has also developed a competence profile which is based on level 7 of the Dutch / European Qualifications Framework, which in turn reflects the five Dublin Descriptors at master level. MDD addresses five general competencies, which have not changed since the start of the programme: framing and strategizing, reflection and awareness, concepting and ideation, creating and crafting, and self directed learning. These competences are developed throughout the curriculum and tested at the mid-term and final stages of the programme (see standards 2 and 3). According to the panel, there is a clear connection between the intended learning outcomes, the competence profile, the grading indicators and the EQF descriptors. The panel found that the formulation of both ILOs and competence profile is precise in terms of contents (digital design) and appropriate in so far as the level (master) and orientation (professional) of the programme are concerned.

Furthermore, the panel found that the four ILOs and the five competences reflect strongly the profile of the programme with its attention to the social and ethical dimension of design and its focus on process rather than product. In their initial feedback on the self-evaluation report, panel members indicated that the learning outcomes allow students to pursue more strategic, T-shaped roles or specialize in one specific area while being aware of all the disciplines that are required in projects. In the workforce it is harder for designers to experience the full length of a project and being truly involved in the decision making. Hence, it is important for students to see the full picture to be able to imagine their careers beyond the one role they may land into. The panel also stressed the importance of helping designers become more critical and more focussed on the process than (just) the output, of stating that design and technology are never neutral and thus that designers need to reach a level of maturity to understand and communicate their ethical standpoints appropriately, of educating designers to guide their clients and not just obey them. Finally, the panel appreciated the attention of the programme (objectives / competences) to self-directed learning.

Professional field

Right from the start, the MDD has been closely connected to the Dutch Digital Design group, a network of design agencies and brands promoting excellence in design work in the Netherlands. Over the years one agency left the partnership while others have joined MDD. The panel welcomed this strong connection to the professional field and acknowledges the efforts of the programme to maintain a network of professional contacts that keeps up with the ever changing field of design.

Moreover, the panel agreed very much with the future vision expressed in the self-evaluation report that MDD needs to diversify the spectrum of entities with which it is working. In addition

to the current range of design agencies, MDD could envisage cooperation with various professional, academic, governmental and cultural organisations in the Netherlands and beyond, as well as with both (very small) start-up agencies and (very big) corporate entities such as IKEA or Nike. This in turn would broaden the diversity of the design projects and in doing so offer a breadth of project work that meets the needs of the programme, student learning and partners, offer students a broader view on the labour market and ultimately enhance / diversify their job opportunities. Finally, the panel thought that some of the longer-term projects might be better placed at some of the bigger players in the network, which are more likely to be interested in looking after students over a longer period of time.

The panel gathered from the discussions that the programme is working towards a more varied network of partners and is rethinking the current partner agency model. In addition to partners providing projects, the panel thought that there is also room for systematic exchange of information on the latest trends in design and the way these trends could/should be reflected in the programme. Furthermore, in order to capture the diverse range of experiences and perspectives across partners and collaborators, the programme intends to host workshops with different professional entities to gain insight and discuss what skills they are looking for among MDD students / design graduates and how these entities translate their vision, mission and worldview in their design processes and outputs.

Considerations

Based on the written materials and the discussions, the panel considers that the MDD is an exceptional programme: attracting diverse student cohorts, developing critical and ethical designers, balancing between practice and theoretical underpinning, and emphasising the importance of reflective practice and self-directed learning. The panel thinks highly of the connection between the profile of the programme and its translation in competences and learning outcomes. The programme has made clear choices and delivers on these ambitions, notably with regard to the social and ethical dimension of design and its focus on process rather than product. It goes to the credit of the programme that this vision is also picked up by students and alumni during the study and in their professional career.

The panel is convinced that MDD offers what the digital design professional of the future needs. Nonetheless, the professional field is changing and digital design is in constant development. The panel welcomes the attention of the programme to these changes and developments and encourages MDD to reshape its partnerships in a more diverse network of professional entities. In this regard, the panel thinks the programme may want to reflect (even) more profoundly on the positioning of digital design in society and how this positioning can be reflected (even) more explicitly in the programme contents.

The panel acknowledges that MDD takes up a unique position in the Netherlands and thinks highly of the features that make MDD stand out. Nonetheless, this position requires specific communication towards (potential) students and (interested) cooperation partners. The panel

welcomes the efforts of the programme to enhance the quality of its communication and acknowledges that the initial misalignment of expectations is being mitigated.

Conclusion

In sum, the panel considers that the intended learning outcomes are formulated in such a way that they are sufficiently concrete with regard to content, level and orientation. Moreover, they align nicely with the profile of the programme and the competences of the future digital design graduate. As a result, **the panel judges that the Master Digital Design at AUAS meets standard 1, intended learning outcomes.**

Standard 2 – Teaching and 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.

Programme

MDD aims to expose students to various perspectives on design and provide them with challenging projects to practice their abilities. Since its very start, the programme is organised along four tracks - creation, literacy, research and strategy - each featuring a year-long course and various additional activities; every track addresses all five competences holistically. Throughout the year, students also work on three projects covering different sides of the design industry. Courses and projects complement and support each other. The panel thinks highly of the programme structure and its four distinctive components that are offered simultaneously throughout the entire year. Moreover, the panel had access to the course materials and studied a sample of projects as part of its end level review (see standard 4). The course syllabi are updated every year and contain relevant materials, according to the panel.

During the visit, the panel shared its overall positive impressions on the programme curriculum with the different stakeholders. Moreover, the panel raised a few topics that may not yet get the attention they deserve in a digital design course. While proposing these additional contents, the panel is fully aware that the MDD is a one-year programme; hence, its curriculum and its content variety can not be extended infinitely.

A first topic relates to the breadth of ethical concerns that students encounter and must consider in their learning. The panel noted that the team have this awareness, which is also demonstrated through the inclusion of KPIs into the programme and delivery. Moreover, the team consider a more explicit framing in the students work of those ethical concerns.

Secondly, the panel noted with satisfaction that the programme is reflecting on Digital Design, on what digital does in today's designers practice and in society as a whole. Nonetheless, the programme curriculum could be considered as being oriented towards UX. In this regard, the

panel discussed with the MDD team to what extent other types of digital design like designing business models, strategic design or concept design receive equal attention.

Thirdly, the panel noted from the curriculum descriptions and its review of project works that students could be exposed more to business skills. The team acknowledged this comment and indicated that it is not explicitly foreseen as a compulsory curriculum component for all MDD students but that students who feel the need/desire to develop these skills, have the opportunity to do so. According to the panel, business skills deserve some more attention in the programme, notably in relation to the student projects, and could be integrated in the curriculum for instance through a dedicated bootcamp.

A final element for discussion was the attention in the curriculum to the theoretical foundations of the digital design domain. While the panel agreed with the programme team that all MDD students are exposed to the foundations of the discipline, it also gathered from the discussions with students and alumni that at least some students had expected / would have liked some more theoretical grounding in the discipline. Anticipating its observations on the project works (see standard 4), the panel found that some of these works could have led to even better quality results when students would have been exposed to - and encouraged to explore - a wider range of theory and models.

A particular feature of MDD is its educational approach: the entire programme is based on a studio model combining lectures, project work, assignments and self-directed education; on average two days per week are dedicated to courses while three days are assigned to projects. This studio model entails that students and teachers constantly share the same workspace, which facilitates teamwork and peer learning. The emphasis on self-directed learning in combination with the studio model empowers students to experiment, develop deeper and search further.

Students appreciate both the curriculum structure and the educational approach. Although they confirmed that a few of their colleagues had different expectations – notably in terms of the programme's grounding and the role of industry – the interviewees themselves had not expected that they could do so many things in one year with the full support from the programme. They consider the work in international groups on multidisciplinary projects a particular strength of MDD. If anything, some students would prefer to get offered more theory, while other students with no background in design mentioned it was difficult to keep up with the students with prior knowledge on design. Moreover, several students and alumni indicated that some more structured attention to creating a portfolio would be useful, a systematic collection of produced work that students can use in their contacts with potential employers. Finally, the panel was informed by both students and alumni that the programme team takes student feedback on board and that suggestions for improvement are implemented when possible.

The panel thinks the authentic studio learning environment is a value added, which will effectively contribute to the students' personal growth. Moreover it appreciates the attention to self-directed learning and reflective practice. According to the panel, the studio reflects the reality of a creative professional environment such as a design agency. Several stakeholders

indicated during the discussions that the studio model works well in preparing students for the work environment where learning also happens in a self-directed manner. The panel welcomes the programme's handling of student feedback. It endorses the request from several students to consider creating a portfolio as well as freedom in the group composition for the third project.

The name of the programme and its language of instruction is English. The panel was informed that this is a conscious choice which was made by AUAS, FDMCI and MDD at the start of the programme and is still very strongly advocated for by all three stakeholders. This choice was initially motivated by the need of industry partners to attract international talent to the Amsterdam region. The panel noted that this motivation remains valid and led to recruiting a more diverse group of students and staff and to involving a broader range of design agencies. The current – fifth – cohort of MDD students is composed of 12 Dutch and 36 international student, 20 of whom are from outside the EU. The panel supports the motivation of the team to offer the programme in English: the current – geographical, cultural and educational – diversity of both students and staff is definitely a value added of the programme.

Every year, MDD selects a fixed number of applicants through a competitive selection process. Starting with 24 students, the size of the current cohort has doubled. The panel understands from the discussions that the decision for an increase in student intake has not been taken lightly and that both FDMCI and MDD have the capacity to deliver the curriculum to a bigger audience maintaining a similar level of quality. The panel noted that the programme is doing very well in terms of attractiveness: about 400 applications were received to fill 48 positions. The admission criteria and selection process are described extensively in the self-evaluation report. Until now, the programme catered for both recent bachelor graduates and students with some years of professional experience. According to the programme management, MDD is better suited to applicants who can show some professional experience.

The panel gathered from the discussions that in future selection processes, professional experience in the design industry will be weighted positively but will not constitute a hard condition for admission. The panel supports this approach: it appreciates the diversity of the student intake - which it considers fundamental in view of the profile of MDD - but is also aware that students should be brought to the same level as early as possible in the programme. This is all the more important as the cherished diversity of students entail that some students enter the programme with limited or no experience in [digital] design while other students have plenty of expertise and this diversity may/does cause some frustration among the latter group. Taking as a basis the group of students and alumni it spoke to, the panel thinks that the 'casting' (selection process) has been done very well up to now: the programme caters not only for students with a variety of backgrounds and some professional experience, but also for students who demonstrated good potential in their recently finished bachelor programme.

Staff

At the time of the visit early 2022, MDD employs seven part-time lecturers, including the coordinator and the head of programme, three part-time coaches for practice-based education,

and two non-teaching support staff. Every lecturer is either assigned to a track or responsible for projects. As track coordinator, teachers deliver the main course, organise workshops and invite relevant guest lecturers. The panel has studied the CV's of the staff and spoke to most of the core team; the individual staff members invariably have good credentials in terms of contents and didactics. Moreover, the panel sensed the enthusiasm and commitment of the team, even from a distance through digital format.

The MDD programme is intense with students being present on site permanently and teachers and coaches sharing studio space five days per week. According to the management of both FDMCI and MDD, the current amount of human resources are sufficient: right from the start, MDD has been resourced quite generously as it constituted the first master programme in the Faculty; the recent doubling of the student intake is also taken into account in the resourcing. The panel was informed that currently, the programme is financially healthy while the staff workload is considerable yet feasible. The internal allocation of tasks has been adjusted this year and the growing intake has allowed for hiring additional support staff for the studio spaces. The panel acknowledged the challenge such an increase in cohort size presents, in the near future, some of the more time-consuming tasks of coordinators and teachers such as admissions and assessment need to be reviewed in order to maintain the same level of quality with less effort. According to the panel, the Studio Coach is an integral part to student support and learning; its role and engagement with students needs to be clear for the student and also reflective of the increased size of the cohort.

Facilities

Given the online character of the accreditation, the panel has not visited the facilities. As of this academic year 2021-2022, the programme has new premises. According to the self-evaluation report, MDD now uses two studio spaces that are exclusively dedicated to its students. These studios are sufficient to host 48 students permanently and offer ample space for design work in small groups. In addition, students can use a dedicated lab for rapid prototyping as well as a curated library. The panel appreciates that the specific didactic approach of the programme is reflected adequately in the facilities. Students and alumni confirmed that the facilities are fine and that the studio space as an environment is very important for peer learning and community building. They also appreciated the expertise and availability of the coaches on site.

Covid-19

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the programme has functioned under various degrees of restriction. Given that MDD is considered practice-based education, at least a limited number of students have been able to do project work in person in the studio space. In this respect, COVID restrictions impacted more on the lectures than on the projects. Moreover, the current facilities are large and properly ventilated, which made it possible to attend classes at times of limited restrictions. MDD students told the panel they have been lucky in the sense that they could meet more often in class than some of their colleagues at AUAS or in other higher education institutions. Moreover, they emphasised that the programme team tried its best to be flexible and paid attention to the wellbeing of the international student group. Nonetheless, all

stakeholders agreed that MDD has been and continues to be an in-person programme focusing on peer learning and community building, two elements that were jeopardised considerably by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The panel understands from the discussions that on the one hand COVID has had an impact on the programme in general and on the programme vibe and student motivation in particular. On the other hand the panel thinks highly of the support from the programme team, its efforts to bring parts of the cohort together and its attention to the wellbeing of the international student group.

Considerations

Based on the written materials and discussions, the panel considers that the teaching and learning environment at MDD is highly developed and authentic, appreciations that apply to the combination of curriculum, educational model, student cohorts, staff and facilities.

The panel considers that there is a strong connection between the profile and learning outcomes of MDD on the one hand, and its teaching and learning environment on the other hand. The curriculum structure is robust, and the learning goals of the respective tracks and projects contribute to reaching the competence profile and ultimately the intended learning outcomes. The profile of the programme and its vision on the profession is implemented in the day-to-day activities of the curriculum and shared by the teaching staff: in this way MDD produces the designers that today's society needs.

Furthermore, the panel thinks highly of the studio environment – both in terms of facilities and as an educational model – and the way students are encouraged to pursue their own interests. Moreover, the panel is very positive about the international and multicultural dimension of the programme, and is confident that these features will be maintained when the admission and selection criteria are severed. The panel also endorses the decision to organise MDD in English as this has proved to attract a very diverse community of students and staff. The panel considers that the programme staff is both competent and committed, and this all the more so when the going got tough in times of pandemic.

Finally, the panel appreciates the quality culture in the programme team: the team takes the time to listen to students and other stakeholders and has implemented changes or adjustments for the better where possible. Similarly, the panel thinks highly of the way in which the team is reflecting on the findings and implementing the recommendations of the midterm review.

In addition to the many positive considerations, the panel has come across a few areas that are already on the mind of the programme team and which it may want to address in the near future. In order to make MDD even more outstanding than it is today, the team could envisage: (i) more attention to business skills in the curriculum; (ii) encouraging students to explore a wider range of theory and models; (iii) actions towards a quicker onboarding of all students, (iv) supporting students in producing a portfolio, (v) more freedom in the composition of project

teams, (vi) identifying more socially relevant projects through a wider range of more diverse partners, and (vi) a greater involvement in the programme of professional partners, also beyond mere project work.

Conclusion

In sum, the panel considers that the programme's teaching and learning environment is both highly developed and authentic in so far as the curriculum, the staff and the facilities are concerned. As a result, **the panel judges that the Master Digital Design at AUAS meets standard 2, teaching-learning environment.**

Standard 3 – Student assessment

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

Assessment system

The programme follows a competence-based educational model. The panel noted from the written materials and the discussions that MDD's assessment model constitutes a fundamental component of this education philosophy. In this regard, the panel welcomes the clear connection between the programme profile, the learning outcomes, the teaching and learning approach and the way student competences are assessed.

The one-year programme features two assessment moments of 30 EC each: after the first semester and after the second semester. Each assessment is conducted by three assessors - two internal staff and one external member: the three assessors consider all the materials presented by the students and score the student performance on five competences (see standard 1), using a competence rubric with achievement and grading levels. The assessment system was described extensively in the self-evaluation report and the panel had a look at the competence rubric: the panel gathered from the materials that the system is well developed and allows for a detailed assessment of the level of competences each student has achieved at the time of the exam. In this regard, the panel echoed the findings of the midterm review which praised the system of assessment, the openness and variety of materials under consideration, and the presence of external assessors. Nonetheless, both the external assessment panel and the midterm reviewers identified the significant workload the assessment presents for both staff and students.

During the visit, the panel discussed the implementation and feasibility of the assessment system with students, alumni, staff, assessors and the Examination Board. Notwithstanding its appreciation of the system, the panel was concerned that the two assessment moments constitute very important milestones representing half of the study credits where minor failures could have major consequences in terms of study delay. The programme team emphasised that it was a conscious choice to go for 30 EC exams in view of the competence-based education, the strong emphasis on project work in the curriculum and the need to evaluate holistically the student

performance across the four tracks. Moreover, the team reassured the panel that students get formative feedback on their progress on the different competences during the semester including the opportunity to present and share with peers and partners, that students receive information and guidance on (how to prepare for) the exam, and that the structure of the curriculum allows for re-sits shortly after the exam in order to avoid major study delays. The panel was informed that students only have to take a re-sit on the individual competences they failed, not on the entire exam; moreover, the Teaching and Examination Regulations foresee an additional (third) examination opportunity as of 2022-2023.

Students and alumni indicated that they receive all necessary information on the exam and have the opportunity to ask for guidance in the run-up to the assessment. Nonetheless, several interviewees emphasised that there is a big difference between the formative feedback throughout the year and the summative exam. A number of students and alumni also indicated that the rationale for this assessment model became fully clear only after the first exam. According to them, students could be prepared better for the summative exam, e.g. through a mock exam or a role-play. Moreover, several students mentioned that the exam requires a lot of preparation time, that not all students are good at producing the written self-reflection on the achieved competences and that the written materials get quite some attention during the exam. Finally, current students indicated that the programme has been taking on board suggestions from previous cohorts: this has led to so-called check-in moments with project staff. Students appreciate this opportunity but consider it would be more effective if students would (be asked to) prepare for the check-in and staff would (be expected to) monitor how students are doing.

The programme team is aware that the assessment workload is huge during the examination week. Internal and external assessors need to read a lot, conduct the assessment interview with the students and provide written feedback on the student performance in each of the five competences. According to the team, this approach is time-consuming but also necessary in the competence based assessment system of MDD if one wants to do justice to the students. The team also acknowledges that the assessment is very comprehensive but can give rise to hyper itemisation. In this regard the panel welcomes the plans for some more holistic considerations during the assessment. In the future, the programme will continue to rely on external assessors, who may be called upon more regularly for reasons of efficiency. The panel understands the rationale developed by the programme team for (maintaining) this type of assessment. Nonetheless, it invites the team to reflect on alternative options, e.g. by reducing the weight of summative 30 EC assessments and including elements of formative assessment during the year. In this way, students will learn more and be tested more often; the spread of the assessment load will in turn reduce the stress for students and the staff workload during the exam week. Furthermore, the panel very much welcomes the input of external assessors yet advises the team to look for ways how to train and prepare these external experts and to ensure that their assessment competences are certified.

All in all, the panel gathered from the discussions that the system of assessment is relevant but that its implementation can be enhanced. The panel sees room for more formative assessments during the year as this will make students aware that their achievements and progress on specific

competences are relevant indicators for their exam performance. Moreover, this approach would reduce the peak assessment workload of staff, the stress levels of students and the 'shock' between the open non-hierarchical learning culture in the studio environment and the hierarchical setting of the holistic competence assessment. Furthermore, the team may want to look for ways how to assess the soft skills of students, which the professional field found a major strength of the MDD students and alumni.

Evaluation of final assessment documents

Prior to the visit, the panel reviewed the documents for final assessment of fifteen MDD students (see standard 4), as well as the completed evaluation forms of these materials. Panel members received not only the written materials, but also the video registration of the exam interviews. Overall, the panel found the majority of projects were evaluated and graded meticulously. Panel members agreed in 13 out of 15 cases to the final grades. Moreover, they found that the evaluation form used was relevant and that assessors had completed these forms in an insightful way. In most cases, the panel thought the feedback comments motivating the grades were appropriate. In other cases, the written feedback could have been further developed. During the visit, the panel advised the programme to inform assessors that students with high quality works and grades also deserve detailed critical feedback on where they could do even better.

Reporting on their individual reviews, panel members noted (i) the significant time investment to review and engage with the process book and the reflection; (ii) the expertise and contemporary knowledge of the assessors including external business stakeholders in the interview and comments; (iii) the ample time assessors took to dive deep into the candidate, the project and their reflections; (iv) the well articulated questions and good discussions of assessors with the candidate, as well as the debate amongst assessors afterwards to come to a score; (v) the assessment format which guides the students in a self-reflection process and allows them to self-determine to a certain extent the way they see success in the specific indicator; (vi) the full picture such evaluation brings on the progress and evolution of the student; (vii) the informal tone and the respect for the students' wellbeing and identity, which is both refreshing and in line with the values of the programme. In those cases where the panel did not agree to the score or the evaluation form, it found that the comments were meagre and not insightful or that the critical quality and maturity of the product was not picked up by the assessors.

Assuring assessment quality

The panel held a dedicated session with the chair and MDD member of the Examination Board (EB). Currently, there is one EB overseeing the assessment procedures for both the bachelor programme Communication and Multimedia Design and the Master Digital Design. Content-wise both programmes are sufficiently similar and every programme has its own staff member on the EB.

The discussion showed that the EB members are experienced and well acquainted with their specific quality assurance tasks. Moreover, the panel noted that several issues it had earmarked for discussed based on MDD's self-evaluation report – communication, contacts between programme and clients, intensity of the exam weeks, formative versus summative assessment, certification of external assessors – are in fact on the minds of the EB members. In this regard, the panel found that the presence and availability of the EB is very valuable for the future development of MDD. The panel invites the EB to look carefully at this external assessment report and to use the panel's suggestions as a lever to discuss its own concerns and considerations with the programme.

Considerations

Based on the written materials and discussions, the panel considers that student assessment is very well organised at MDD. The programme has developed a robust assessment system that befits both the profile of the programme and its educational approach.

The panel acknowledges that the holistic assessment of five competences in two major summative exam moments is a specific feature of the programme. The panel welcomes the constant attention of the team to making this assessment feasible for both students and staff. It suggests MDD to enhance this feasibility and the student learning curve by including more formative assessment moments throughout the year. Furthermore, the panel thinks highly of the presence of external assessors, yet advises to ensure these external experts have the necessary assessment credentials.

As the proof of the assessment pudding is in the eating, the panel reviewed a sample of project work evaluations and overall was satisfied with the quality and the care with which assessments are performed and evaluations are reported. The panel agreed to almost all grades and found that these grades had in most cases been very well motivated in the evaluation forms.

The panel considers that the assessment quality is well guarded by the Examination Board, whose members are competent and committed. It invites the Examination Board to use the recommendations of this external assessment report in its own discussions with the MDD team on furthering the assessment quality of the programme.

Conclusion

In sum, the panel considers that MDD can rely on a robust system of student assessment that is implemented meticulously. As a result, **the panel judges that the Master Digital Design at AUAS meets standard 3, student assessment.**

Standard 4 – Achieved learning outcomes

The programme demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.

The panel has established whether the programme learning outcomes have been achieved in two ways: through a quality review of the final products and by checking what MDD graduates are doing professionally after they finished the programme.

Quality of end level products

In line with NVAO requirements, the panel reviewed the final deliverables of a representative sample of 15 students who graduated MDD in the academic years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. In line with its holistic assessment of competences, the MDD programme does not rely on a single course or product to establish whether students have achieved the learning outcomes. In the run-up to the visit, therefore, the panel received for every student in the sample the documents for final assessment. In most cases these materials consisted of three projects the students were involved in during the entire programme. Overall, the panel was very satisfied with the quality of the projects. It thought the projects under review demonstrated that the students had reached the expected competences and intended learning outcomes of the programme. None of the panel members had any doubt on the quality, hence not a single project was passed on internally among the panel for a second review.

Overall, panel members were impressed by what MDD students were able to achieve and explore in one year. Reporting on their individual findings, panel members pointed to:
- the breadth and range of project subjects;
- projects reflecting the components of the intended learning outcomes;
- the nice results of real-life projects with real-life clients;
- good quality design projects with a social purpose and a digital heart;
- the depth of understanding students demonstrate regarding the design process/thinking;
- the solidity of the projects with desirability and feasibility being well explored;
- the execution, documentation and iteration of the projects as a sign that students have not only learnt the theory of the process but also internalised it and used it as a tool;
- the instrumental use of technology, which is not leading the creative process but shows that students can apply a strategic approach;
- the attention paid to the process and to handle wicked problems;
- students demonstrating through the projects a sense of maturity: they understand their responsibility towards society and do so according to their own unique world view.

Furthermore, the panel established that the programme team also deserves some of the credit for the quality of the projects and the way in which students approach these projects. The results show that students have not only acquired the intended learning outcomes and competence profile, but have also internalised the vision of the programme on digital design and its position in society. Finally, the panel was satisfied to hear during the discussions that the programme is organising an end-of-year exhibition where students show their projects and are interviewed on stage by professionals.

If anything, the panel found that all projects invariably were of (very) good quality but none of the projects was really exceptional. One possible explanation according to the panel might be

the strong focus in the curriculum on the process of (digital) design, which leads to less outspoken attention to digital design theory and research in the projects. The panel acknowledges that the focus on process of the programme in general and the student projects in particular is valuable. Nonetheless, understanding the problem / goal in questions and reflecting on design is equally important. While this finding should not lead to a review of the curriculum, the panel does advise the programme to reflect how it could incorporate this component more explicitly in the (project) activities of those individual students who expect(ed) more theoretical grounding in the programme.

Performance of graduates

Since its initial accreditation, 120 students enrolled in the MDD programme: 117 students have graduated by now, including 15 students *cum laude*. According to the self-evaluation report, most MDD graduates are successfully employed and occupy a wide range of positions that are commensurate with the domain and level of their studies. The panel noted that the programme team maintains close relations with its alumni, who are involved - Covid permitting - in MDD activities and connected to the student cohorts. For the programme team, alumni play a critical role in bridging the gap between design industry and design education.

The midterm review panel noted in January 2021 that MDD graduates are ready to enter the work field and praised the competency of graduates, notably their criticality and their attention for ethics. Moreover, it recommended the programme to re-evaluate the connection between the (achieved) learning outcomes and the work field by gathering data and insights on how the MDD competences can be applied in professional practice. It also invited the programme to understand better where graduates aim to work after their studies.

The current external assessment panel noted that MDD is taking these recommendations at heart, among others by holding a round of consultations with partner agencies and by looking to expand its network to other agencies and a more diverse range of entities. The discussions showed that the professional network of MDD is growing more diverse with different partners – also outside the group of 'usual suspects' – showing keen interest to maintain and expand the cooperation.

Furthermore, the panel gathered from the discussion with alumni and professional field representatives that MDD graduates are creative, critical and ethical designers, who according to the professional field have good soft skills. The self-reflection, autonomy and confidence of the alumni the panel spoke to are testimony to the quality of the programme.

Considerations

Based on the written materials and discussions, the panel considers that students who finish the MDD programme have indeed achieved the learning outcomes and competence profile. It thinks highly of the graduation works, which reflect the vision and objectives of the programme and demonstrate the breadth and depth of what students have explored and learnt in one year. Moreover, the panel established that alumni are creative, critical and ethical designers with

good soft skills who find a relevant position in the professional field. The programme (team) deserves credit for the strong qualities of both the people (graduating students and alumni) and their products.

In addition to these very positive considerations, the panel welcomes the recent efforts of the programme to widen and diversify the network of project/programme partners. This is all the more important as both alumni and professional field representatives can advise on the latest trends in (digital) design and can translate programme competences in professional practice. Moreover, a more diverse network of cooperation partners will allow students to benefit from a wider range of projects and connect to a wider range of potential employment opportunities.

Further to its findings on the project quality, the panel advises MDD to consider incorporating the theoretical component of digital design more explicitly in the project activities of those individual students aspiring more theoretical grounding.

Conclusion

In sum, the panel considers that the quality of the MDD projects and the professional performance of MDD alumni demonstrate that programme graduates invariably achieve the intended learning outcomes. As a result, **the panel judges that the Master Digital Design at AUAS meets standard 4, achieved learning outcomes.**

Overall judgement

The panel has established that the Master programme Digital Design meets all four NVAO standards under consideration: intended learning outcomes, teaching-learning environment, student assessment and achieved learning outcomes. As a result, its overall assessment of the quality of the Master programme Digital Design is positive. **The panel therefore issues a positive advice to NVAO on the Master Digital Design at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences.**

ANNEXES

Annex 1 – Administrative data on institution and programme

Administrative data on the institution

Name of the institution: Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences

Status of the institution: publicly funded

Result of the institutional quality
assurance assessment: positive (2019)

Contact person: Dr Gabriele Ferri (g.ferri@hva.nl)

Administrative data on the programme

Name: Digital Design
CROHO: 49131
Level: master
Orientation: professional
Credits: 60 ECTS
Location: Amsterdam
Mode of study: full-time
Language: English
Tracks: not applicable

Annex 2 – Panel

Dr. Heather Robson, chair

Heather is the Head of Northumbria School of Design (UK), where she oversaw among others the development of a portfolio of MA, MSc and Professional Doctorate degrees across subject areas in Design. Heather has experience in accreditation reviews in the UK and chaired the midterm review of MDD.

Cecilia Scolaro, member

Cecilia studied Industrial Design at the Politecnico di Milano (Italy) and has extensive experience in the digital field, among others as Director of Strategy and Design at Mirabeau, at Cognizant and now as Responsible Design Director at foryounadyourcustomers in Amsterdam.

Imara Felkers, member

Imara studied Philosophy at the Radboud University. She teaches Design Research at the Utrecht University of the Arts (HKU) and is examiner in HKU's Master Crossover Creativity. Imara has extensive experience in competence-based education, assessment and examination, and is preparing a PhD at the University of Glouchestershire Performing Arts and Production.

Martijn Arts, member

Martijn studied Industrial Design Engineering at Delft University of Technology. As entrepreneur he developed a creative strategic web office and is now director and partner at Total Design. Martijn has been teaching and is still guest lecturing at several Dutch universities.

Romy Koppert, student-member

Romy is in the second year of the Master Interaction Design at Umeå Institute of Design in Sweden. Before she studied contemporary dance at the Rijnijssel School of Performing Arts and industrial design at the Eindhoven University of Technology.

The panel was assisted by **Mark Delmartino**, MDM Consultancy bv, Antwerpen – Belgium. As freelance secretary, Mark has worked with NVAO panels since 2006. He is certified by NVAO and belongs to the AUAS pool of certified external secretaries.

All members of the panel, as well as the secretary have signed the NVAO independence form. The panel chair was informed of the NVAO profile for Panel Chairs (2016).

Annex 3 – Schedule of the online visit

Monday 28 February 2022

08.00h	Open consultation hour
09.00h	Internal panel meeting
09.30h	Session with management
10.30h	Session with current students and recent graduates
11.30h	Session with lecturers and coaches
12.15h	Session with internal and external assessors
12.45h	Lunch and internal panel meeting
13.45h	Session with alumni and professional field
14.15h	Session with Exam Committee
15.30h	Session with management (optional)
16.00h	Internal panel meeting
17.00h	Plenary feedback session
17.15h	End of online visit

An overview of the persons interviewed is available from the programme on request.

Annex 4 – Materials reviewed

Prior to the site visit, the panel studied the programme's self-evaluation report:
- Master Digital Design. Reaccreditation Dossier, January 2022

Moreover, the panel looked into other university-wide, faculty-wide and programme-specific materials, such as:
- Admissions evaluation form
- Course syllabi
- Rubric of competences / indicators
- Examples of reworked indicators
- Description and instructions for preparing the assessment documents
- Examples of feedback forms and grading forms
- Documentation on the selected graduation projects
- Overview of MDD alumni positions
- List of guest speakers
- Teaching and Exam Regulations
- List of MDD personnel
- Student demographics 2020-21 and 2021-22
- Student evaluations
- Exam committee annual report
- Programme committee minutes
- Meetings with agencies
- MDD midterm review report

The panel reviewed a representative sample of documents for final assessment from 15 students who graduated between September 2019 and August 2021. A list of the selected materials is available from the programme on request.