

University of Amsterdam
College of Social Sciences

WO-Bachelor Computational Social Science

External Assessment Report

Conditionally positive Initial Accreditation Procedure

March 2022

Introduction

This report concerns the external assessment of the conditions set by NVAO in order for the bachelor programme Computational Social Science at the University of Amsterdam to obtain a positive initial accreditation.

In February and March 2021, a panel of peers convened by NVAO carried out the initial accreditation assessment and reached a conditionally positive conclusion regarding the quality of the bachelor programme Computational Social Science. The NVAO adopted the advice of the panel: the new programme complied with standard 1 (intended learning outcomes) and partially complied with standards 2 (teaching-learning environment) and 3 (student assessment).

In view of its envisaged starting date in the academic year 2022-2023, the programme was required to meet the following two conditions by June 2022:

- a revised set of (more concise) learning outcomes at course level, which reflect the course contents and build towards the exit qualifications at programme level;
- a revised set of course assessments, which allow for a valid, reliable and transparent way to establish that individual students meet the course objectives and the exit qualifications, and that can help students develop themselves on an individual level.

The panel which performed the initial assessment consisted of four members, including a student. As one member of the initial panel was no longer available for the assessment of the conditions, the University of Amsterdam submitted a request to NVAO to change the panel composition. The NVAO agreed to the request on 10 November 2021, which was registered under number 010637. The panel performing the assessment of the conditions is composed of:

- Prof. Dr. Sally Wyatt, professor of Digital Cultures, Department of Society Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University, chair;
- Dr. Marie Postma, vice-chair Department of Cognitive Science and Artificial Intelligence, Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences, Tilburg University, member;
- Ruward Karper, student of the joint master Data Science & Entrepreneurship Eindhoven University of Technology & Tilburg University, student-member.

The panel was assisted by Mark Delmartino, NVAO-certified secretary, who was involved in the same capacity in the initial accreditation and now also liaised between the programme and the panel before, during and after the assessment.

Since the initial accreditation, the team at the University of Amsterdam has further developed the programme and produced materials that would allow the panel to assess whether the conditions were met. During the preparation phase, it was agreed that these materials would become available by the end of February in order for the panel to perform its assessment by the end of March. The panel and the programme also decided to hold a clarification session in mid-March. The materials were made available on 17 February 2022. The panel members studied the documents and reported on their findings to the panel secretary, who in turn compiled these

impressions in view of the panel's internal meeting and its clarification session with programme representatives on 14 March 2022. On that same day, the panel held another internal meeting to decide whether the conditions were met and on what findings and considerations this decision would be based. The programme team was informed of this decision by e-mail.

The panel secretary then produced a draft version of this report and circulated it among the panel members for review. The pre-final version of the document was validated by the chair and submitted to the programme on 21 March 2022 for a check on factual errors. Following the programme's reply, the panel produced and the chair validated the final version of the report, which was submitted to the University of Amsterdam on 23 March 2022.

Assessment

Programme

In its report on the initial accreditation assessment, the panel summarised the programme profile as follows: Computational Social Science is positioned at the intersection of social sciences, humanities and computational sciences, and includes expertise in research and statistics, as well as change-making skills. Students in Computational Social Science learn to design and create sustainable digital interventions for complex societal challenges and acquire five interrelated competencies: to analyse data on social problems, to identify opportunities for change, to design evidence-based strategies that seize upon digital opportunities, to programme digital interventions hands-on, and to create conditions that support digital innovation. They do so through a transdisciplinary, project-based curriculum featuring student engagement and High Impact Learning. The new bachelor programme is offered by three faculties of the University of Amsterdam (Science, Humanities, and Social and Behavioural Science) and is hosted by the College of Social Sciences. The current panel performing the assessment of the conditions establishes that this profile is still valid.

Condition 1 – learning outcomes at course level

In order to meet the first condition – to produce a revised set of (more concise) learning outcomes at course level, which reflect the course contents and build towards the exit qualifications at programme level – the programme provided an extensive 32-page document in which the exit qualifications (i.e. the intended learning outcomes at programme level) are linked to learning trajectory objectives (intended learning outcomes per domain of expertise) and the learning trajectory objectives are connected to the intended learning outcomes of semester courses (i.e. course learning goals).

The panel noted that the programme team has thoroughly revisited the interconnection between the intended learning outcomes of semester courses and the programme's exit qualifications by focusing on objectives of the learning trajectories (LTOs). During the clarification session, programme representatives indicated that the production and formulation of the LTOs has been a team effort involving both learning trajectory coordinators and the envisaged examiners of the semester courses. During this process, the development team has used a university-wide learning trajectory visualisation tool. Moreover, three dedicated sessions of programme framework review were facilitated by the Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies.

Already during the initial accreditation assessment, the panel found that the exit qualifications were adequate: the set of intended learning outcomes is comprehensive and neatly aligns with the purpose of the programme, the breadth and depth of the different constituent disciplines and the requirements of an academically oriented bachelor programme. Moreover, each exit qualification was, and still is, connected to one of the Dublin Descriptors. The novelty in the additional materials is that both exit qualifications and Dublin Descriptors are now linked to a

number of learning outcomes per domain of expertise (trajectory). According to the panel, these LTOs are formulated at a high level of abstraction and state clearly what the contents of the programme are, and which knowledge and skills students are expected to acquire in a particular stage of their studies.

Furthermore, and based on the newly formulated LTOs, the programme team recalibrated the intended learning outcomes of the semester courses. The panel noted that – in line with the indications in the initial accreditation report - the team has made efforts to reduce the number and the level of detail of the respective semester course goals. The panel understands from the materials and the discussions that this exercise allowed the programme development team to formulate semester objectives in less detail while still retaining specificity and clarity to ensure adequate and thorough assessment. In fact, various semester objectives have been merged, adjusted and/or made more consistent. Moreover, the panel established that there is now a clear connection between the individual LTOs and the way these are addressed through the newly recalibrated intended learning outcomes in the respective semester courses.

In sum, the panel welcomes the efforts of the programme development team and is satisfied with the result. The framework of interconnected Dublin Descriptors, exit qualifications, learning trajectory objectives and intended learning outcomes per semester course may not necessarily have been reduced in size, its structure now is clear and its formulation adequate. Moreover, the panel found that the renewed framework also answers another concern that was highlighted in the initial accreditation report: the need for greater clarity regarding the extent to which students have to be familiarised with and become competent in each of the domains of expertise. The newly formulated LTOs and their translation in semester course outcomes sketch a much clearer – and more feasible – picture of what future Computational Social Science bachelor students should achieve by the end of their three-year programme. Hence, **the panel considers that the programme meets condition 1.**

In addition to its positive conclusion, the panel noted that the framework is complex. It advises the programme team to communicate the objectives of the programme, the trajectories and the courses to students with more clarity and less complexity. The panel provided this feedback during the clarification session and gathered from the team's response that they are very much aware of this complexity and they are developing study manuals for students in which this framework will be explained carefully.

Condition 2 – course assessment

In order to meet the second condition – to produce a revised set of course assessments, which allow for a valid, reliable and transparent way to establish that individual students meet the course objectives and the exit qualifications and can help students develop themselves on an individual level - the programme provided an updated and extended version of the student assessment section it had submitted in the original information dossier for initial accreditation.

In its initial accreditation assessment report, the panel appreciated the curriculum structure featuring semester-long thematic projects and the HILL (High Impact Learning that Lasts) didactic model. It thought both elements were innovative and particularly suited to implement a programme with different areas of expertise that all receive attention in the curriculum. The new assessment section confirms this project-based didactic approach where students develop their expertise within intertwined learning trajectories by working on projects in small groups. All formative and summative assignments are collected in a portfolio. The new materials also include a clear – and according to the panel adequate - overview of assignments.

The panel noted furthermore that assessment will be divided equally between individual assessments and group assessments. Each learning trajectory will be assessed once with an individual summative assignment to ascertain all students have individually mastered the learning objectives. Per semester, students make at least one product or intervention that covers and integrates the outcomes of the four learning trajectories. The Capstone project in semester 6 is assessed through both individual and group assessments and deliverables. To facilitate individual development and goal-setting in the context of group work in the four semesters and for the Capstone, all groups will set up and sign a Team Charter, a tool to facilitate group work by clearly formulating and separating individual and group learning objectives at the start of a project. A template of the envisaged Team Charter was added to the materials for the panel.

The balance between individual and group assignments is also visible in setting the final grades per semester: this grade consists of the weighted average of the team grade for the group project (50%), the grade for the individual contribution to the group project (10%), and the grades for the four individual assignments ($4 * 10\%$). To pass the semester course, the weighted final grade should be 5.5 or higher. In addition, students must pass all individual assignments, including the individual contribution to the group project. The Capstone project is also assessed in a 50/50 ratio.

The programme team also addressed another concern of the initial accreditation panel: the potentially cumulative and extensive study delay of individual students as a result of failing group assignments or individual assignments. The panel noted that the new materials contain a range of organisational decisions to avoid unnecessary delays for students. For instance, retake opportunities are provided within each semester and the Capstone projects will be offered in both the spring and fall semesters to increase flexibility in study planning. If a student does fail semester 3 or 4, they can already continue with their electives before they retake that semester in the following years. As the programme will be a very different experience for every student, the programme provided a number of personas, i.e. examples of situations students might find themselves in. The panel found these examples very informative.

According to the panel, the above-mentioned new arrangements constitute a good basis and certainly protect individual students better from having to re-take an entire semester course at a (much) later stage due to poor group or individual work results. During the clarification session, the programme representatives indicated that the system has been discussed with the semester course examiners and that there are opportunities for dispensation on personal

grounds. Moreover, the tutors overseeing the group assignments should notice and handle cases of free-riding.

Both the initial accreditation in early 2021 and the recently revised and updated materials constitute a reality on paper. The proof of the pudding will follow in the future: the first cohorts of students going through the respective semester courses and their assessment will show the robustness of the system. The panel is confident that the Exam Committee will interpret the programme assessment system in such a way that it will find reasonable solutions for each individual case and prevent students from incurring or accumulating extensive and avoidable study delay.

In sum, the panel thinks the programme now has an adequate system of assessment in place, which reaches a better balance between individual exams and group assignments and allows individual students to demonstrate their expertise throughout the programme. Moreover, it facilitates the programme to establish that each individual student meets the respective course objectives and exit qualifications. The panel considers that the updated section on student assessment contained not only a revised set of course assessments, but also presented a clear, balanced and feasible system of assessment which makes it possible to establish effectively whether individual students meet the course objectives and the exit qualifications and can help students develop themselves on an individual level. Hence, **the panel considers that the programme meets condition 2.**

Outcome

The programme development team has provided extensive and relevant materials to inform the panel about the changes and adjustments it has made to the bachelor programme Computational Social Science with regard to the intended learning outcomes at course level and the system of course assessment. Having studied the written materials and obtained further clarification during an online session with the core team, the panel found that the new arrangements proposed by the programme are relevant and adequate.

The panel appreciates the work performed by the energetic and committed programme team. The new materials demonstrate that the team has taken on board the concerns expressed by the initial accreditation panel and also adjusted elements that strictly speaking were not part of the conditional approval.

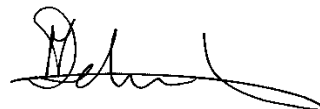
Having analysed the new materials, the panel considers that the programme meets the two conditions - proposed by the initial accreditation panel and validated by NVAO in 2021 - for a positive initial accreditation. **The panel therefore advises NVAO to issue a positive decision regarding the quality of the wo-bachelor Computational Social Science at the University of Amsterdam.**

The Hague, 21 March 2022

On behalf of the panel assessing the conditions for initial accreditation,



Sally Wyatt
Chair



Mark Delmartino
Secretary