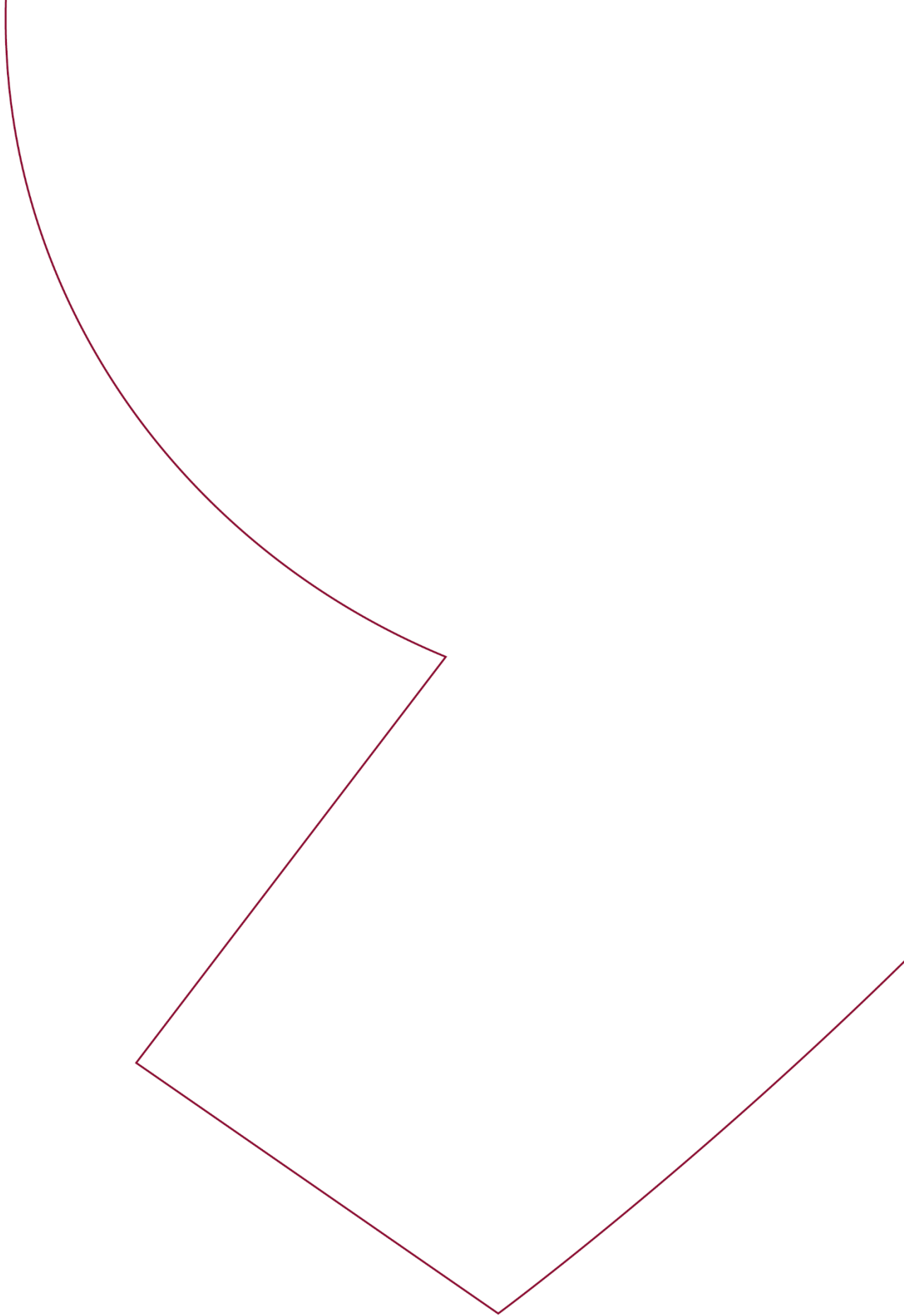


## **ASSESSMENT REPORT**

Limited programme assessment

**Master's programme Legal Research**  
Full-time

**Utrecht University**



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Limited programme assessment

**Master's programme Legal Research  
(60744)**

Full-time

**Utrecht University**

Hobéon Certificering & Accreditatie

**Date**

July 29<sup>th</sup> 2024

**Audit Committee**

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## 1. GENERAL AND QUANTITATIVE DATA

Name Institution	Utrecht University
Status	Funded
Outcomes of Institutional Quality Assessment	Positive, decision of March 19th, 2018
Name of programme in Central Register of Higher Professional Education (CROHO)	Legal Research
ISAT-code CROHO	60744
Domain/sector CROHO	Law
Orientation	Academic
Level	Master's
Degree	Master of Laws (LLM)
Number of credits	120 EC
Specialisations	Not applicable
Location(s)	Utrecht
Mode(s) of study	Full-time
Language(s)	English
Date site visit	February 5 - 7, 2024

## 2. SUMMARY

The two-year master's degree programme in Legal Research (LRM) of Utrecht University trains students to become researchers in the field of law. Graduates have a well-developed set of research skills and a high degree of insight into the wider discipline of law as well as a specific profile specialisation. The level of intended mastery of these skills is ambitious and requires graduates to be able to independently conduct research that can be published in international law journals and conferences. Completion of the LRM - in combination with a bachelor of laws degree – grants civil effect (*civiel effect*), provided that sufficient legal subjects have been taken in the bachelor's degree programme.

### **Standard 1. Intended learning outcomes**

Judgement: meets the standard

In the eyes of the panel the ambitions of the programme are appropriate for a research master's programme, the ambitious nature of the programme is convincingly reflected in the exit qualifications, and the exit qualifications align with the national Domain-Specific Reference Framework for Law (DSRK), the Dublin descriptors, and the multidimensional and socially oriented departmental profile. They also fulfil the additional criteria for a research master's programme and are strongly connected to the focus areas of research at the School of Law. Finally, they ensure that graduates attain an academic master's level equipping them very well for a research career or a career outside of academia.

### **Standard 2. Teaching-learning environment**

Judgement: meets the standard

The panel praises the LRM programme for its thoughtful design, diverse offerings, and challenging environment for ambitious students. The option for students to choose an individual research profile and the strong connection with the research programmes of the Department of Law of the Faculty of Law, Economics and Governance Faculty (REBO/LEG) are notable strengths in the eyes of the panel. Clearly defined learning objectives and competencies ensure that the course content effectively guides students towards achieving both course objectives and overall programme exit qualifications.

The balance between compulsory courses and freedom to choose an own field of interest is well managed. The programme's three learning trajectories offer comprehensive opportunities for students to gain in-depth legal knowledge, a solid methodological foundation, and intensive skills training. Scientific integrity is well integrated into the courses and research modules. The programme is responsive to student feedback, particularly regarding a possible shift towards more empirical research in the methodological trajectory.

The programme's educational vision is based on learning by doing, creating a highly engaging learning environment with varied instructional methods, small-scale teaching, and differentiated learning trajectories. This creates the right environment for students to experience research in practice. It also allows for active engagement with the research conducted within the School of Law.

The panel also concludes that the LRM thesis trajectory is clearly designed and implemented and guides the students very well in all the steps in their research and writing. Senior researchers play an important role in the supervision of the trajectory, which the panel considers appropriate for a research master's programme.

English is deemed appropriate for the programme's international focus, with options for Dutch students to conduct research or take electives in Dutch. The programme provides ample opportunities for students to explore future job prospects.

While the programme faces challenges due to varying entrance levels, the panel is pleased to see that it is taking adequate measures to address these. The panel encourages the programme to continue its efforts in finding adequate methods to guarantee a truly international, diverse and inclusive classroom involving present students and alumni in this process.

The programme's structure, instructional methods, study load, and guidance make it feasible to complete the LRM within two years, though many students take longer due to personal choices or extended research projects. The panel encourages the programme to continue paying attention to the right balance between flexibility for the students and teaching them to finish a research project in a limited amount of time.

The programme benefits from knowledgeable and inspired faculty, with significant attention to their professional development. They all have a doctorate degree and 8 out of 12 teachers in de core courses are tenured professors. The panel commends the program for the fact that the majority of faculty have BKO qualifications and almost 50% SKO. The students find the lecturers highly qualified and unequivocally praised their personal approach and approachability.

Finally, the panel believes the own meeting space for the programme is an important asset for social cohesion and commitment to each other and the programme.

### **Standard 3. Student assessment**

Judgement: meets the standard

The variety of assessment methods ensures that the final qualifications are achieved, as the panel was able to assess. All information on assessments is made available to students and teachers in an orderly manner. The quality of assessments in the programmes is more than adequate and appropriate for the academic master's level of the programmes and the assessments adequately cover the learning objectives of the courses and the exit qualifications of the programme. Therefore, the panel concludes that students are thoroughly prepared to finally carry out research independently.

The panel also noted with satisfaction that the assessment process of the final thesis is carefully designed, transparent, reliable, and valid. The assessment of the final works uses clear and relevant criteria, laid out in a uniform assessment form with a specification of the criteria. All theses reviewed by the panel had been assessed by two examiners. Nonetheless, the panel noticed a significant difference in the amount of feedback on the assessment forms. The panel recommends aligning practice of the different examiners in this respect in such a way that all students receive grades and feedback that are traceable and useful to them.

The panel was very happy to see that the Examination Board and the Examination Quality Committee take their duties very seriously and guarantee the quality of assessments and the level achieved within the programme more than adequately. The panel noted that the (time) compensation for the work done by the Board and Quality Committee seem to be rather low and recommends the management to reconsider if more compensation is necessary for the continuation of their effective functioning.

#### **Standard 4. Achieved learning outcomes**

Judgement: meets the standard

The panel was impressed with the level of the LRM theses. It saw some extraordinarily impressive works, some of which are publishable and a few of which would not even be out of place as dissertations. The theses convinced the panel that the graduates of the programme achieve a high level of academic knowledge and research skills and convincingly reach the exit qualifications.

Many graduates continue their research career after completing the LRM by writing a PhD dissertation. Others obtain jobs in law firms, as in-house lawyers or policy advisors in companies or with the government, in the scientific bureau of the Netherlands Supreme Court, in NGOs or in international institutions. The fact that most alumni already find jobs before graduating and that even in the more limited market for PhD positions graduates of the programme find positions, proves to the panel that the exit qualifications and the high ambitions of the programme are achieved. Upon completion of the master's programme, graduates are in a good position to begin an academic career as a PhD student or pursue a career outside academic research. The panel is also pleased to see a strongly connected community of students and alumni of the Legal Research master's programme.

#### **Overall conclusion**

Based on the fact that the panel assesses standards 1 and 2, 3 and 4 for the master's degree program in Legal Research with 'meets the standard', the panel arrives - based on the decision rules for the NVAO's Limited Programme Assessment – at the final assessment of **'positive'** for the University of Utrecht's wo-master's programme in Legal Research as a whole. The audit panel therefore advises the NVAO to maintain the accreditation of this programme.

After agreement of the panelists, this report was adopted by the chairman on July 29<sup>th</sup> 2024.



### 3. INTRODUCTION

#### General information

This assessment report presents the result of the 'Limited Programme Assessment' of the two-year academic master's programme Legal Research. The assessment followed the procedure and standards of the NVAO Assessment Framework for the Higher Education Accreditation System of the Netherlands (September 2018). Also applicable are the Guidelines NVAO assessment of research master's programs (2015) and the *Nadere uitwerking aanvullende criteria onderzoeksmasters* (30 May 2016). The assessment was conducted on February 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> 2024 in Utrecht by an audit panel of independent experts (see appendices II, III and IV for programme, procedure, decision rules and panel composition). In addition to the programme in question, the Dutch-language bachelor's programme *Rechtsgeleerdheid*, the master's programmes *Nederlands Recht*, *Notarieel recht en Onderneming en recht*, and the master's programmes in *European Law*, *Public International Law*, and *Law & Economics* were also audited on those days. The results of the audit of those programmes are covered in three other reports.

The master's degree programme in Legal Research is offered by the Department of Law of the Faculty of Law, Economics and Governance (REBO/LEG). The programme is part of the faculty's Graduate School. The department has two educational directors: one responsible for the undergraduate programme and the other for the seven legal master's programmes.

Besides Utrecht University only the *Rijksuniversiteit Groningen* and *Radboud Universiteit* also offer a two-year research master's programme in law in The Netherlands.

#### Recommendations from previous visitation

In its Self-evaluation reports (SER), the programme provides an overview of the actions it has taken in response to the recommendations of the previous accreditation panel (2018). Some of the recommendations and the ensuing follow-up actions were discussed during the site visit. The current panel finds that, by and large, the recommendations have been addressed or the programme has well-grounded motivations for disregarding specific recommendations. Where relevant, this report elaborates on this finding.

#### Civil Effect (*civiel effect*)

The so-called civil effect required for admission to the Judiciary, the Public Prosecution Service or the Bar is not directly part of this assessment, but the panel has indirectly included it under standard 1 in the report ("degree in which the programme meets legal professional requirements and requirements of the profession"). In accordance with the 2016 Covenant on Civil Effect<sup>1</sup> - subject to exceptions defined in the covenant - the basis for obtaining civil effect is a completed legal university bachelor's degree (180 EC) and a completed legal university master's degree (60 EC). The Covenant formulates minimum attainment targets that programmes must meet in order to be allowed to attach civil effect to the master's degree.

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<sup>1</sup> Parties to the Civil Effect Covenant were the law faculties of Dutch universities, the Dutch Bar Association, the Council for the Judiciary and the Public Prosecution Service.

## 4. FINDINGS AND JUDGEMENTS

### 4.1. Intended learning outcomes

**Standard 1: 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.**

**Explanation:** The intended learning outcomes demonstrably describe the level of the programme (Associate Degree, Bachelor's, or Master's) as defined in the Dutch Qualifications Framework, as well as its orientation (professional or academic). In addition, they tie in with the regional, national or international perspective of the requirements currently set by the professional field and the discipline with regard to the contents of the programme. Insofar as is applicable, the intended learning outcomes are in accordance with relevant legislation and regulations.

#### Findings

The master's degree programme in Legal Research (LRM) trains students to become researchers in the field of law. Graduates have a well-developed set of research skills and a high degree of insight into the wider discipline of law as well as a specific profile specialisation. During the two-year programme, students learn to set up, conduct, and report on legal research, both in writing and orally. The level of intended mastery of these skills is ambitious and requires graduates to be able to independently conduct research that can be published in international law journals and conferences. Graduates are qualified for PhD positions (both in the Netherlands and elsewhere). Although conducting research is central to the programme, graduates also qualify for positions outside of academia, such as investigative positions in (inter)national courts or research departments of (inter)national law firms.

The programme differs from the other legal master's programmes at Utrecht University in its duration, didactical concept, its outspoken research orientation, intensity, and rigorous selection. Completion of LRM - in combination with a bachelor of laws degree – grants civil effect (*civiel effect*), provided that sufficient legal subjects have been taken in the bachelor's degree programme.

At the same time, the Legal Research programme aligns its profile with the Utrecht Education Model and the three guiding orientations of all master's programmes at REBO:

- European and international orientation
- Multidimensional orientation
- Social orientation

With the multidimensional orientation, the Department of Law refers both to insights and perspectives derived from other fields of law (internal legal comparison), other (international) legal systems (external legal comparison), and non-legal disciplines (interdisciplinary). The department is also committed to delivering critical, socially engaged and broadly oriented lawyers who not only understand the development of law, but also how law relates to the social context in which it operates.

This ambition has been translated into programme-specific exit qualifications, the first of which is the backbone: "Graduates are able to conduct legal research, independently and in collaboration with others, that meets high level academic requirements". The programme is structured around three methodological perspectives: internal, external/empirical and comparative.

Exit qualifications 2-7 elaborate on this, stating that graduates:

2. are able to report independently on that study at the level of an international academic publication;
3. have an overview of the fields of the philosophy of science and theory of knowledge relevant to legal research and can explain views and points of departure of philosophers of science to legal research in a critical manner;
4. have an overview of comparative law and are able to design, carry out and report on comparative law studies;
5. can read, speak and write academic legal English;
6. have an overview of the field of the methods and techniques of legal research, can explain them, can formulate problems and questions and know how to operationalize them, given the nature of the questions and the subject matter; in addition, the graduates can compare the methods of social science research to the methods of legal research and integrate the results of social science research into their legal research;
7. are capable of presenting a research design and a research study at an international academic seminar or at an international conference in an understandable manner in both written and oral form.

Two of the exit qualifications refer to the acquisition of in-depth knowledge of a chosen focus area of law and its international and European context:

8. have been able to acquaint themselves with the knowledge and insights obtained in the fields of one of the research focus areas of the School of Law which are included in the University's focus areas and have acquired in-depth knowledge in at least one of these fields;
9. are able to quickly obtain an overview and then expand and deepen their knowledge of and insight into the dynamics of law in an international and European context;

Finally – in response to a recommendation of the 2018 visitation panel – a qualification was added with regard to integrity rules for research and one with regard to self-reflection:

10. know, understand and comply with the requirements of scientific integrity as laid down in the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research 2018;
11. are capable of reflecting upon their own academic performance.

The panel finds that the ambitious profile of LRM is adequately reflected in the exit qualifications. They align with the Utrecht Education Model, the three guiding orientations of all master's programmes at REBO, and research skills take an important place. The exit qualifications – laid down in the Education and Examination Regulations (EER) – are also in line with the national Domain-Specific Reference Framework for Law (DSRK) and the Dublin descriptors and fulfil the additional criteria for a research master's programme. The programme has followed the previous panel's recommendation to name scientific integrity and ethical dilemmas more explicitly in the exit qualifications. They conclusively lead to alumni at an academic master's level, who are well prepared for careers as a researcher or outside academia. The panel also appreciates the clear relation to the focus areas of research at the School of Law as a whole.

The Social Advisory Board of the Department of Law meets once every six months to advise on the quality and content of all legal programmes, including the Legal Research programme. This advisory board mainly discusses programme-transcending topics and less the concrete content of individual programmes. The latter occurs more in the direct and often informal contacts that the individual teachers have with alumni and the professional field (see also Standard 3 and 4).

The panel believes that the programme has collected enough input from the professional field to develop its profile and exit qualifications and keep them up-to-date.

### **Considerations and Judgement**

Judgement: *Meets the standard*

The panel concludes that the master's programme Legal Research meets Standard 1, considering that (1) the ambitions of the programme are appropriate for a research master's programme, (2) this ambitious nature of the programme is convincingly reflected in the exit qualifications, (3) the exit qualifications are in line with the national Domain-Specific Reference Framework for Law (DSRK), the Dublin descriptors and the multidimensional and socially oriented departmental profile, (4) they are connected to the focus areas of research at the School of Law and (5) they ensure that graduates attain an academic master's level equipping them well for a research career or a career outside of academia. Concluding, they fulfil the additional criteria for a research master's programme.

Based on the positive findings, the panel concludes that the programme demonstrates compliance with standard 1. Accordingly, the panel arrives at the judgment "meets the standard" for Standard 1 "intended learning outcomes".

## 4.2. Teaching-learning environment

### **Standard 2: The curriculum, the teaching-learning environment and the quality of the teaching staff enable the incoming students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.**

**Explanation:** The intended learning outcomes have been adequately translated into educational objectives of (components of) the curriculum. The diversity of the students admitted is taken into account in this respect. The teachers have sufficient expertise in terms of both subject matter and teaching methods to teach the curriculum, and provide appropriate guidance. The teaching-learning environment encourages students to play an active role in the design of their own learning process (student-centred approach). If the programme is taught in a language other than Dutch, the programme must justify its choice. This also applies if the programme bears a foreign language name. The teaching staff must have a sufficient command of the language in which they are teaching. Services and facilities are not assessed, unless they have been set up specifically for the programme concerned.

### **Findings**

#### *Structure and design*

The first year of the programme is filled with seven compulsory courses and the first research project of 7,5 EC each. Three compulsory courses deal with the Dynamics of Law and aim at teaching the ways in which the law constantly develops and changes due to interaction between different legal fields and layers as well as constant societal, political, and technological developments. Four of the courses build methodological knowledge and train research competences. In period 4 students work on their first research project with an internal or comparative angle. First year students also participate in *Academic Writing and Presentation Skills* and a *Methodology Round Table*, that are part of the preparation for the Research Projects I and II and the final Thesis Legal Research.

During the second year, students choose a profile and related elective courses that can be taken at the School of Law, but also at other faculties of Utrecht University, other universities in the Netherlands or abroad. Students can, for instance, take courses abroad, participate in a moot court competition, or do internships at NGOs, embassies, international courts, and law firms. This gives students full control over their programme, with the restriction that their intentions are assessed by the programme leader for coherence, demonstrating a connection with the research programmes of the School of Law, and offering a sufficient knowledge base for writing the LRM thesis. Within their profile, students work on a second research project (7,5) and spend half of the year writing their final thesis.

For a schematic overview of the programme see the table below:

<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Period 1</b>	<b>Period 2</b>	<b>Period 3</b>	<b>Period 4</b>
	<b>Dynamics I:</b> Constitutional and Administrative Law (7.5 EC)	<b>Dynamics II:</b> Criminal Law, Human Rights and International Law (7.5 EC)	<b>Dynamics III:</b> Private Law (7.5 EC)	<b>Methodology IV:</b> Empirical Perspective (7.5 EC)
	<b>Methodology I:</b> Internal Perspective (7.5 EC)	<b>Methodology II:</b> Comparative Perspective (7.5 EC)	<b>Methodology III:</b> Law as an Academic Discipline (7.5 EC)	<b>Research Project I:</b> Internal and/or Comparative Perspective (7.5 EC)
	<b>Academic Writing and Presentation Skills</b> (prep for Thesis Legal Research)	<b>Academic Writing and Presentation Skills</b>		<b>Methodology Round Table</b> (prep for Thesis Legal Research)

		(prep for Thesis Legal Research)		
<b>Year 2</b>	<b>Period 1</b>	<b>Period 2</b>	<b>Period 3</b>	<b>Period 4</b>
	<b>Elective course within research profile</b> (7.5 EC)	<b>Elective course within research profile</b> (7.5 EC)	<b>Thesis Legal Research</b> (30 EC)	
	<b>Research Project II: External Perspective</b> (7.5 EC)	<b>Elective course within research profile</b> (7.5 EC)	<b>Methodology Round Table</b> (support for Thesis Legal Research)	<b>Methodology Round Table</b> (support for Thesis Legal Research)

The panel is very positive about the well-thought-out programme, the way it is structured, the variety it offers, and the challenging learning environment it provides for ambitious students. The individual research profile that a student can choose is very motivating and well-guided by the staff. The learning objectives and intended competencies of the courses are clearly formulated, and the panel could easily discern how the course content leads students to achieve these objectives. The Self-Evaluation Report (SER) showed a sound self-awareness of the programme, including its pitfalls and the consequences of the choices made. Students whom the panel interviewed during its site visit appreciated the room for their own initiative within the programme, not only in the elective parts but also during the first-year courses. They were also positive about the fact that the methodology courses run concurrently with the Dynamics courses and Research Project I, as this allows them to immediately apply what they learn in the methodology courses.

The 2018 visitation panel recommended that LRM students be given additional tasks and challenges when taking regular electives as part of their research profile. The programme explains in the SER why it did not follow up on this recommendation. The foremost reason is that the programme encourages the students to take courses that are outside of their comfort zone. That implies that these courses are dealing with topics that are not their expertise, and therefore require an extra effort anyway. The programme also fears that setting extra tasks or burdens would make students less likely to take courses that are outside their comfort zone. The present panel can go along with these considerations.

#### *Incoming students and onboarding*

The programme is a selective master's programme, with a maximum capacity of 25 students per year and an integral selection procedure. In practice, the programme does not reach this capacity and welcomes an average of 16 students per year. The programme itself finds an actual number of 20 students to be the most desirable and seeks a higher number of applications, especially from bachelor's students outside Utrecht University. This would enable it to consider a variety of diversity criteria.

The 2018 visitation panel recommended increasing the international orientation of the students. The team has followed up on this by emphasizing to students from the very beginning of the programme that they can take (part of) their electives, complete an internship, or write a research project or even their thesis abroad. It also actively advertised the LRM Wiarda Travel Fund, which reimburses travel costs abroad up to 450 euros. Since then, to the satisfaction of the panel, more students have written their research projects or thesis abroad, taken internships in international organisations, or taken courses outside the Netherlands. Additionally, students travel to other countries for academic exchanges during workshops, seminars, and conferences, or to do fieldwork.

Furthermore, the programme aims for a proportion of non-Dutch students of 25-35 percent per cohort, which, in the eyes of the present panel, would indeed be a crucial factor in increasing the

international orientation of the programme and in adding more non-Dutch (or non-Western) perspectives to it. To achieve this, the programme increased the availability of scholarships (especially for non-EEA students) and stepped up its efforts to bring the programme to the attention of potentially interested bachelor's students, which the panel applauds. In recent years, this target has generally been met, but the programme notes that it remains a challenge to welcome sufficient non-Dutch students and even more students from non-Western countries. The panel strongly encourages the programme to continue these efforts and involve current students and alumni in finding adequate methods to ensure a truly international, diverse, and inclusive classroom. The recent development to add a Global South perspective to the first course and critical legal studies to the methodology is, in the panel's view, a helpful direction to follow up on.

To be admitted to the Legal Research programme, candidates with a Dutch bachelor's degree must have obtained an average grade of at least 7. In addition, candidates must explain in a motivation letter what attracts them to the LRM and to conducting research in law and attach two written papers. Candidates who have completed their bachelor's degree outside of Utrecht University must also submit two letters of reference. The initial screening is carried out by the School of Law's Admissions Office, which advises the Admissions Committee on their eligibility. The Admissions Committee, comprising the programme leader and the programme coordinator, interviews the pre-selected candidates either in person or via video conference. This way, they try to get a complete picture of the student's motivation, intended research profile, basic skills for conducting legal research, prior legal knowledge, and English language proficiency.

The panel discussed with those involved in the programme the different pre-education and entry levels of the students. The majority have graduated from a Dutch bachelor's programme in law or a Dutch bachelor's programme in Liberal Arts and Sciences (mostly at Utrecht University College). All students are expected to have a basic knowledge of EU law, which is not always easy for students from non-EU backgrounds and students who have not completed a bachelor's degree in law. For them, the programme has prepared a self-study literature list to help them increase their knowledge of EU law before the start of the programme. The first Dynamics course can nevertheless prove to be tough for those students, yet all students and teachers with whom the panel spoke were of the opinion that this quickly evens out and is not a serious problem in further stages of the programme. In the methodology courses, it is also not felt to be a problem, since the subjects are new to most of the students. The Dutch students who spoke with the panel saw the presence of co-students with non-legal or non-European backgrounds as an asset to the discussions, as it provides a different perspective on the law they are taught. The panel concludes that the programme is taking sufficient measures to ensure that the difference in entry levels does not stand in the way of high-quality teaching and does not create insurmountable thresholds for non-European students.

#### *Relationship to intended learning outcomes*

After studying the programme and a selection of the courses, the panel concludes that the content of the programme adequately covers the exit qualification as formulated by the programme. In terms of content and design, the courses studied are at the level that can be expected of an academic research master's programme. The programme's assessment plan demonstrates a conclusive relationship between the final competencies of the entire programme and the learning objectives of its constituent components (see also Standard 3). The content of the programme furthermore shows a systematic accumulation of knowledge and skills leading to the achievement of the overall exit qualifications. The assignments students are required to work on fit well within the research orientation of the programme.

### *Learning trajectories*

The Legal Research master's programme is structured along three learning trajectories:

1. Building and deepening knowledge and insight from a multidimensional perspective through understanding the dynamics of law in the European and international context and through the choice of students' own profile of electives and research projects.
2. Methodological competence building from an internal perspective, a comparative perspective and an external and empirical perspective (see Section 10.1).
3. Developing and training research skills through the research components of compulsory courses, research projects and thesis.

As mentioned earlier, the three substantive Dynamics courses (a total of 22.5 EC) help students achieve the first objective of LRM, which is to understand the ways in which the law constantly develops and changes. The course Dynamics I discusses the dynamics of law from the domain of constitutional and administrative law, Dynamics II from the domain of criminal law and international human rights law, while Dynamics III concentrates on private law.

The students acquire additional in-depth knowledge in a specific direction of their own choice in the 22.5 EC elective space during the second year, during their research projects, and while researching and writing their final thesis. The panel is very positive about the way in which the programme offers students ample opportunity to obtain in-depth knowledge of the dynamics and substance of law, in an adequate mix of compulsory courses and freedom to choose their own field of interest.

In the methodological trajectory, a strong emphasis is on the four methodology courses, which take up 30 EC in the first year:

- Methodology I: Internal Perspective
- Methodology II: Comparative Perspective
- Methodology III: Law as an Academic Discipline
- Methodology IV: Empirical Perspective

These methodology courses provide students with a solid foundation for conducting legal research independently. The emphasis in Methodology I is on methods of classical legal research, such as legal doctrinal research or qualitative case-law analysis ('internal' perspective); Methodology II teaches students the intricacies of conducting legal comparative law ('comparative' perspective); Methodology III focuses on the historical background and philosophy of science ('external' perspective, with a focus on legal history and philosophy of science), while Methodology IV concentrates on a different aspect of the 'external' perspective, which is that of empirical and social science methods of research. These perspectives as well as the connection and overlap between them allow students to take part in theoretical discussions on methodology. In addition, they acquire the competencies for selecting and applying a wide range of research methods, which they subsequently can use in developing their research competencies (third learning trajectory).

Various aspects of integrity are expressly addressed in all methodology courses. For example, the course Methodology I deals with careful handling of sources and plagiarism, while Methodology IV addresses issues around informed consent and research data management as well as integrity matters related to publishing. The Methodology Round Tables facilitate discussions on which decisions to make when 'grey areas' are concerned, i.e., areas where doubts may arise about the application of integrity norms. The panel is very happy to see that throughout the entire programme scientific integrity is firmly embedded in the courses and research modules.



The students indicated in their chapter of the Self-evaluation report, that the course on empirical methods could be improved with more practical exercises. They feel that more attention needs to go to empirical research, since this research method is increasingly being developed in the legal field and demanded by the labour market. The programme seems to endorse their plea for more attention to empirical research and is planning a broad discussion on this with students and staff. The panel understands that this requires tough choices and substantive changes in the programme because it means other subjects will receive less attention, such as comparative legal research methods or philosophy of science. It saw with satisfaction that the programme management is very responsive to the feedback by the students and trusts that the programme will take well-informed decisions on a possible shift in focus of the methodological learning trajectory.

The learning trajectory on developing and training research skills also runs throughout the entire programme, starting with the courses on Dynamics. 'Learning by doing' plays a central role. The present emphasis in research assessment on team spirit and impact is reflected in the trajectory. In the courses Dynamics I and II, students work on research papers in small groups of 2 to 4 persons, they receive training and feedback on collaboration skills and on giving and receiving feedback. In Dynamics III, students are asked, individually, to write a research proposal for a conference and prepare a scientific paper. In the Methodology courses, students have to analyse PhD theses on the methodology used and translate the insights gained into their own research papers (Methodology I), they write papers applying comparative methods (Methodology II), reflect on certain external perspectives (Methodology III) and formulate a research proposal (Methodology IV).

In Research Projects I and II (15 EC in total), the students learn to combine the research skills obtained and the knowledge and insights acquired from the Dynamics and profile courses. In the research projects, some independence is required of the students, in the sense that they themselves choose the topic, define the relevant research question, design, and conduct the research as well as present the results in a paper. One of the research projects can be a collaborative or team science project or can be part of a larger, staff-run research project. The learning process is supported by the guidance and feedback offered by experienced research staff who act as supervisors. Students thus gradually learn to master a range of research competences in the first year.

The panel praises the programme for the transparent way in which it has embedded the three separate learning trajectories in the programme, and the thoughtful way in which they all come together. Content and the training of research skills are intertwined in almost all parts of the programme. To complement the three trajectories and as part of the final Thesis Trajectory, the programme offers different forms of support to students. This includes a course in academic English, writing skills, and presentation techniques (*Academic Writing and Presentation Skills*) in the first semester of the first year, and workshops on bibliographic and referencing tools, collaborative research, time management, communication in an intercultural environment and self-analysis. Also, part of the programme, is the Methodology Round Table that students take part in from the last period of the first year onwards and which takes place once every two weeks. During the roundtable meetings, students talk to each other about problems and questions that arise when conducting research, for instance the selection of a sample for a case-law study or the best way to incorporate interviews in a research project. In addition to this trajectory, students are offered personal and research-oriented individual support by a tutor, by the programme team and by their supervisors. The panel praises the programme for the individualised and thorough support in the development of knowledge and skills of its students.

#### *LRM thesis*

The LRM thesis, which counts for 30 EC, is an independent piece of scientific work by the student reflecting his or her original research. In the Thesis Legal Research (LRM thesis), all the knowledge and skills acquired from the start of the programme are integrated and students

demonstrate that they meet the exit qualifications of the programme. The thesis is expected to be approximately 30,000-40,000 words in length, including footnotes. Theses that are shorter or longer can be accepted if the contents and form of the thesis justify the deviation and the student can demonstrate that approximately 20 weeks of full-time work have been spent on the research and reporting. The result should be a paper that approaches the level of an article in a scientific journal with double-blind peer review as much as possible.

Students select the subject of the thesis in consultation with their tutor (see more under Study Guidance) and/or the supervisor. The tutor and the supervisor must ensure that the chosen topic aligns with the student's profile courses and research projects to ensure the coherence and quality of the student's overall research profile. In consultation with their supervisor, students prepare a research plan including a draft introduction, a definition of the central research question and sub-questions, a description of methods, an outline and a provisional source list. This research plan must be approved by the supervisor and second assessor. Once the outline has been approved, the students conduct the research independently, but under supervision.

The supervision of an LRM thesis – most of the time by senior researchers and tenured professors – is generally comparable to that of a PhD thesis. The thesis trajectory involves the entire research cycle. The LRM thesis supervisor provides regular feedback on the structure, research design, use of sources and the reporting of research results. The frequency of this feedback depends on the individual supervisor and the needs of the student. However, the programme team has provided a document for all LRM thesis supervisors, in which some guidance and minimum norms are suggested. LRM thesis supervision typically involves offering written feedback that is then discussed with the student on at least three occasions. For each LRM thesis, 40 hours of supervision is allocated.

From the interviews with students, the panel found that students are very satisfied with the set-up and intensive guidance of the research and thesis process. They feel very well-prepared once they start the actual writing process. Students also experience the guidance by the staff as very good and personal. The panel noted, with satisfaction, that the LRM thesis trajectory is clearly designed and implemented and guides the students very well in all the steps in their research and writing.

#### *Research and academic orientation*

The master's programme is intrinsically linked to the research conducted in the School of Law, which gives the students ample opportunities to be confronted with actual research right from the beginning of their studies. Research at the School of Law has been organised into six research centres that focus on research from the multidimensional perspective mentioned hereinabove:

- the Montaigne Centre for Rule of Law and Administration of Justice (Montaigne Centre),
- the Utrecht Centre for Shared Regulation and Enforcement in Europe (RENFORCE),
- the Utrecht Centre for Accountability and Liability Law (UCALL),
- the Utrecht Centre for European Research into Family Law (UCERF),
- the Utrecht Centre for Water, Oceans and Sustainability Law (UCWOSL).
- In addition, a new research cluster has been created which is called Empirical Research into Conflict-Solving Institutions (ERI).

In the most recent research assessment of 2022, the evaluation committee stated to be impressed with the quality of the research performed at the School of Law and with the research strategies, the academic culture and the way in which the School of Law tries to create a positive environment stimulating high-quality research.

The LRM offers its students ample opportunities to take advantage of the strong research culture within the School of Law. Students conduct their research projects and LRM thesis on an individual basis, but one of their projects can be part of a larger study conducted within one of the research centres and ERI. Each year, the research centres introduce themselves and their ongoing projects to the first-year LRM students. In consultation with their supervisor and tutor, students can design their research project or thesis in such a way that it can fit into the bigger picture, while still qualifying as an independent project. This often results in a (co-)publication or presentation of research at a conference. In addition, LRM students can participate in an interdisciplinary research collaboration the Institutions Think Tank of Utrecht University, which is part of the Strategic Research Theme 'Institutions for Open Societies'.

The strongly motivated and high-skilled students are much wanted by those research institutes. The close linkage between teaching and research makes teaching in LRM very attractive for teachers and requires less preparation for them than teaching in other programmes.

#### *Professional orientation and career development*

Since the main aim of the programme is to educate prospective researchers, the orientation is inherently focused on the academic profession. That does not mean, however, that the students are not confronted with developments in society and in the legal profession. On the contrary, the programme – as much as the research at the School of Law in general – are strongly embedded in society.

The Research Review of 2022 praised the societal relevance of most of the research done by the School of Law research centres and stated that “many of the researchers from the School of Law are visible in the media, both national, European and international. Besides visibility on national television and in newspapers, they have experimented with new forms of societal impact, such as organising a Europe Festival and presenting podcasts”. The review also noted that many of the publications address practice and policy issues. Because of the close connection of the LRM to the research centres of the School of Law, this strong emphasis on valorisation and impact is very visible in the Legal Research programme as well. The panel considers this a great asset and praises the programme for this. In addition, many of the teaching staff of the LRM are involved in the public advisory committees or serve in the judiciary as deputy-judges in a court or court of appeal, which also brings practical experience in the legal field into the classroom. One of the professors is Advocate General to the Council of State (*Raad van State*).

To help students preparing themselves for a future career, the programme brings information about vacancies to the attention of students via the LRM Blackboard Community and pays throughout the programme attention to life after graduation. This is done for instance by organising or facilitating lectures where alumni come to talk about their work or opportunities to acquire scholarships or PhD positions are discussed. During a yearly career and alumni event, in close collaboration with the Faculty's Career Services, the programme offers workshops in career orientation, networking and self-analysis. Many opportunities are further created for networking and career orientation through the contacts with the core lecturers, tutors and supervisors, who often stimulate students to take part in conferences and networking events and who can discuss ambitions and opportunities with them on a personal level. The panel was happy to establish that students have enough opportunities to become acquainted with future job opportunities. The fact that the programme takes two years is certainly helpful in this respect.

#### *Language of instruction*

For the general part of the programme and all supporting activities, including the social ones, English is the lingua franca. However, the individual and profile parts can be done in Dutch when individual students want to specialise in research of Dutch law topics and the subject of their courses or individual projects makes the choice for the Dutch language obvious. During the site visit, the panel discussed with the programme management the use of English as the

language of instruction and the exception for the individual research profile of Dutch students. The 2018 visitation panel recommended offering the programme fully in English and not allowing students to do research or take electives in Dutch, but the programme has in the eyes of the present panel adequately motivated why it has not given follow-up to this advice. The panel considers English an appropriate choice given the international and multidimensional orientation of the programme and favours the possibility for the Dutch students to do research or take electives in Dutch, since a certain number of them will end up in Dutch academia and need to be prepared for writing and doing research in Dutch.

English language proficiency (level C1) is one of the recruitment requirements for academic staff, and the university offers courses and training programmes for teachers to invest in their language development. Most staff members have a good command of English, based on their publishing and teaching experience in English. Students appreciate that the larger part of the programme is taught in English and seem to be satisfied with the level of English proficiency of the teachers. The recommendation to use English as the language for meetings of the 'Opleidingscommissie' have been implemented. School of Law policy papers are all provided for in two languages.

Enrolment is possible only after it has been demonstrated that the requirement of sufficient command of the English language has been met (see also under *incoming students*).

#### *Methods of instruction*

The didactic concept of the LRM programme is based on the premise that research skills can only be properly learned 'by doing'. The panel can confirm that the intensive learning environment with small scale teaching, many assignments and enough contact hours create a very student-centred approach that enables differentiated learning trajectories and allows for active engagement with the research conducted within the School of Law. A limited capacity for the education of research students is allocated to the research groups for this purpose. The small size of the programme and selected group of very motivated students adds to this.

Students generally follow two courses at a time with an average of two to four hours per week per course. The number of self-study hours is about 15 hours per week per course. For the content-oriented, knowledge-acquisition parts of the Dynamics courses, students mostly study literature and case law individually and may be asked to prepare short thought papers or reflection papers. Other assignments vary from defining a good-quality problem definition, shaping a descriptive-analytical or comparative law research project, writing research papers, both individually and in groups, reviewing the work and presentations of peers, and engaging in collaborative research. The dynamics and methodological courses involve intensive and highly interactive two- or four-hour seminars in a small group (usually around 15 students). In these seminars, lecturers actively engage the students in critically discussing certain topics or readings. In addition, there are weekly tutorials (5 to 7 students) for all courses where students give each other feedback on papers or present their work under the guidance of the lecturer. During the tutorials, not only the content of the paper is discussed in detail, but also the process of conducting research individually or in teams. In addition, the Dynamics courses involve individual or group presentations of the papers that students are writing. Formative, structured peer and staff feedback is given, allowing students to learn from each other's comments and from the lecturer's specific expertise when preparing final versions of their papers. In addition, students are encouraged to reflect on their learning and their roles in team science. This approach is further reflected in the research projects and the LRM thesis, during which students are coached individually by experienced researchers in selecting the topic, defining a research question and developing a research approach.

For Dynamics I and II, students are asked to work on a collaborative paper, while the other compulsory courses demand them to write an individual research paper. In the past also Dynamics III involved a group paper, but the panel is pleased to assess that the programme

changed this into an individual paper – in line with the recommendation of the 2018 visitation panel to bring down the number of group assignments. The programme also strengthened the formative learning for the remaining group assignments by embedding the assignments in the trend of team science and training students how to engage in collaborative projects. This also involves teaching the students to reflect on their own roles in the research process.

For the profile courses in the second year, the teaching methods depend on the courses chosen. As indicated above, a profile course can also take the shape of an (approved) internship, a moot court competition or a course taken in a different faculty or abroad.

The panel is impressed by the highly activating and varied methods of instruction, the very personalised learning environment and the balance between contact hours and self-study. It assessed that the methods of instruction of the programme are very well chosen and suitable to achieve the exit qualifications.

#### *Study guidance and feasibility*

The panel was able to establish, that the structure of the programme, the chosen methods of instruction, study load and guidance of the programme ensure that the programme is feasible to complete within two years. Most students find their programme challenging, but doable when they put sufficient effort into it.

From the student chapter of the SER and the meeting with students of the programme, the panel concluded that students are generally positive about the intensity of the compulsory part of the programme but do find the first semester of the first year especially intense. In the course of the first year, students seem to grow into the intensity of the programme and start to appreciate the steep learning curve of the programme. They also appreciate that each student has an own tutor – in most cases a senior staff member – who is available during the entire programme for questions of all sorts relating to the study path of the student. The panel noted with satisfaction that the programme management is very keen on monitoring the well-being of the students and reducing the pressure on them as much as possible, for instance by not putting too much emphasis on competition and awards. Students to whom the panel talked seemed to appreciate this. Nevertheless, many students struggle with keeping their research projects within the constraints set by the programme, which asks them to finish a research project (7.5 EC) within one period in parallel to another course. This, and delays in the LRM thesis trajectory, are part of the reason that not many students finish the programme within two years. On average, they graduate after just over 2.5 years. At the same time very few students leave the programme – approximately one per year and most of them for personal circumstances – which the panel sees as proving that the selection process is adequate and effectively matches the right students to the programme. The panel can to a great extent go along with the programme's view that it does not see the longer duration as problematic as long as this is the result of conscious choices of the students themselves to add extra activities for their personal and academic development to their time at university. It does, however, endorse the programme's efforts to ensure that the research projects and final research and theses stay within reasonable proportions and are not a stumbling block preventing students from graduating within the set period of time. It noted with satisfaction that the programme has reduced the expected word count, is training supervisors to teach their students how to limit their projects and has set stricter deadlines for submitting the first proposal. The panel encourages the programme to continue paying attention to the right balance between flexibility for the students and teaching them to finish a research project in a limited amount of time.

For questions about study choice and planning, study skills, regulations surrounding the study or any problems (whether personal or otherwise), students can contact the student advisor. The student advisor is also the first point of contact within the programme for students with disabilities and grants basic services. If necessary, the student advisor refers students to other

facilities that Utrecht University has especially for students, such as the student psychologists and deans, Skills Lab, Student Welfare, etc. Furthermore, students can make use of guidance in the area of labour market orientation and career guidance by the REBO Career Services.

The panel read the EDI (Equity, Diversity and Inclusion) Action Plan of the faculty with action to take on faculty level. It also learned during its visit, that the Legal Research programme itself is also consciously working on creating an open and safe learning environment with an attractive programme for students from all kinds of backgrounds. Very helpful in that respect is the tight and small community and special facilities, such as an own LRM room at the university, where students can meet and hang out with each other. Teaching methods, such as the Methodology Round Table, are also very conducive to an inclusive environment. Although none of the students to whom the panel spoke had an international background, the panel got the impression from their colleague students that they receive adequate guidance in finding their way in the Dutch educational setting (see also under onboarding activities).

## **Teachers**

### *Quantity*

The panel encountered an engaged and driven team of teachers, and the students the panel met with were also very positive about the teachers. In general, the choice of small-scale teaching presents challenges for management of the Department of Law. In the regular programmes one of the measures to ensure that teachers are not overloaded is to schedule a teaching-free week every 10th weeks of teaching. During those weeks, teachers do not have to grade exams or participate in meetings. Furthermore, the Department of Law has a teaching coordinator for each section, whose job is to monitor the load for each employee. This includes not only teaching but everything involved in being a teacher and researcher. In this way, the Department of Law has a clear picture of the balance for each individual teacher. When assigning (teaching) tasks, the degree of experience of the lecturer is also taken into account - someone with a lot of experience is assigned more teaching than a lecturer who has yet to build up experience - and the relationship with the research in which the lecturer is engaged. Lecturers are given - on paper and on average - 40% time for research and 60% for teaching. Teachers indicated that this adjustment of the teaching/research ratio from 70% - 30% to 60%-40% - is a substantial improvement for them. Also, additional appointed teachers - made possible with incentive funds - provide relief from the workload at the programmes. During periods when a teacher is doing a lot of research, he/she is given fewer other commitments. The panel was impressed by the individual attention of the department to workload among teachers. It was persuaded by its discussions with management that small-scale teaching may at first appear to increase workload, but in the long run motivates both faculty and students more and ultimately lowers workload due to the smaller number of students who have to retake courses and exams. Furthermore, the research-oriented nature of the LRM programme makes the division between research and teaching less of an issue for the teachers, since the teaching gives them a lot of input for their research and the students frequently participate in research projects. One point of attention is the workload of the course coordinators, whose tasks have become heavier since they receive less secretarial support.

### *Quality*

Every teacher at Utrecht University must have the Basic Teaching Qualification (BKO). The UU regulation BKO-SKO describes the process for obtaining this qualification. The details of the implementation within the faculty can be found in the Faculty Regulation BKO REBO. Within the faculty, lecturers who want to obtain their basic qualification are offered a BKO Development Trajectory (BOT). In addition to individual supervision, this track consists of didactic training and supervised intervention. A Senior Teaching Qualification (SKO) is required for all positions higher than UD ('Universitair Docent') with managerial duties in the field of education.

All 12 core lecturers in the Legal Research master's programme have a doctorate degree and are affiliated to one of the department's researchcentres. Eight of them are tenured professors with a track record in the field of their research. At the time of the site-visit, 14 of the 15 persons teaching in the Legal Research programme had a BKO, and seven were in the possession of an SKO. The panel is impressed with the outstanding and high-level teaching staff of the LRM. Lecturers, in addition to the BKO and SKO pathways mentioned above, can take advantage of an extensive range of training, such as, for example, educational leadership courses, honours education, interdisciplinary education and community engaged learning.

Concluding, the panel praises the programme for its knowledgeable and inspired teachers and for the attention paid to their professional development. Students also indicated in the interviews and in the student chapters that they found the lecturers highly qualified and unequivocally praised their personal approach and approachability.

### **Program-specific facilities**

As said before, the LRM avails over an own meeting room, where students meet socially but also to discuss programme-related issues, such as study progress, study content, developments in society and career plans. An extra positive effect of this own space is the intermingling of second-year students with first-year students, who can informally coach them as well. Another programme-specific facility is the personal tutor, who is assigned to each student for the full period of the programme. The panel believes the own meeting space for the programme is an important asset for social cohesion and commitment to each other and the programme.

### **Considerations and Judgement**

Judgement: *Meets the standard.*

The panel reaches this conclusion on the basis of a number of considerations: first of all, it praises the LRM programme for its thoughtful design, diverse offerings, and challenging environment for ambitious students. The option for students to choose an individual research profile and the strong connection with the research programmes of the School of Law are notable strengths in the eyes of the panel. Clearly defined learning objectives and competencies ensure that the course content effectively guides students towards achieving both course objectives and overall programme exit qualifications.

The balance between compulsory courses and freedom to choose an own field of interest is well managed in the eyes of the panel. The programme's three learning trajectories offer comprehensive opportunities for students to gain in-depth legal knowledge, a solid methodological foundation, and intensive skills training. Scientific integrity is well integrated into the courses and research modules. The programme is responsive to student feedback, particularly regarding a possible shift towards more empirical research in the methodological trajectory.

The programme's educational vision is based on learning by doing, creating a highly engaging learning environment with varied instructional methods, small-scale teaching, and differentiated learning trajectories. This creates the right environment for students to experience research in practice. It also allows for active engagement with the research conducted within School of Law.

The panel also concludes that the LRM thesis trajectory is clearly designed and implemented and guides the students very well in all the steps in their research and writing. Senior researchers play an important role in the supervision the trajectory, which the panel considers appropriate for a research master's programme.

English is deemed appropriate for the programme's international focus, with options for Dutch students to conduct research or take electives in Dutch. The programme provides ample opportunities for students to explore future job prospects.

While the programme faces challenges due to varying entrance levels, the panel has noted that it is taking adequate measures to address these. The panel encourages the programme to continue its efforts in finding adequate methods to guarantee a truly international, diverse and inclusive classroom involving present students and alumni in this process.

The programme's structure, instructional methods, study load, and guidance make it feasible to complete it within two years, though many students take longer due to personal choices or extended research projects. The panel encourages the programme to continue paying attention to the right balance between flexibility for the students and teaching them to finish a research project in a limited amount of time.

The programme benefits from knowledgeable and inspired faculty, with significant attention to their professional development. They all have a doctorate degree and 8 out of 12 teachers in core courses are tenured professors. The majority of faculty have BKO qualifications and almost 50% SKO, which is commendable. The students find the lecturers highly qualified and unequivocally praised their personal approach and approachability.

Finally, the panel believes the own meeting space for the programme is an important asset for social cohesion and commitment to each other and the programme.

Based on the very positive findings, the panel concludes that the programme achieves basic quality for standard 2. Accordingly, the panel arrives at the judgment "meets the standard" for Standard 2 'Learning Environment'.



### 4.3. Student assessment

**Standard 3: The programme has an adequate system of student assessment in place.**

Explanation: The student assessments are valid, reliable and sufficiently independent. The requirements are transparent to the students. The quality of interim and final examinations is sufficiently safeguarded and meets the statutory quality standards. The tests support the students' own learning processes.

#### Findings

##### *System of assessment*

Testing takes place in accordance with the rules laid down in the documents Assessment Policy Department of Law (September 2018; edited and updated September 2023) and Guidelines for Assessment Quality of Law (entered into force 2017). An important starting point for testing within the programmes is the principle of "constructive alignment" which ensures that learning objectives, study and teaching activities and testing formats are aligned. In the University Education Catalogue and in the Course Planner, students can find the descriptions of all courses with information on learning objectives, content, forms of work and contact hours, study materials and the forms of testing used. The Legal Research master's programme has an assessment plan that provides insight into the way in which the learning objectives of the courses are realised. The Examination Board Regulations describe the procedure of assessing. Moreover, all information on assessments is made available to students and teachers in an orderly manner.

The panel believes that the quality of assessments in the programmes is more than adequate and appropriate for the academic master's level of the programmes. The testing is generally valid, reliable and transparent. Based on the interviews and written information, the panel also concludes that the assessments adequately cover the learning objectives of the courses and the exit qualifications of the programmes. Examinations align well with teaching. The system of student assessment supports the student learning process, with both formative and summative examinations. The panel examined a selection of a number of courses and the assessment plan of the programme and established that the variety of assessment methods ensure that the final qualifications are achieved. The forms of assessing are sufficiently varied, and many courses have two moments of assessment. Because practicing research and actual writing is part and parcel of the entire programme and accompanied by many feedback and grading moments, students are thoroughly prepared to finally carry out research independently.

##### *Final thesis assessment*

By reading the documentation and interviewing teachers and students, the panel noted with satisfaction that the assessment process of the final thesis is carefully designed, transparent, reliable, and valid. It also read a representative sample of 15 final works and assessed them. In general, the panel members agreed with the final grades given by the reviewers. The assessment of the final works uses clear and relevant criteria, laid out in a uniform assessment form with a specification of the criteria. As mentioned in the description LRM thesis under Standard 2, peer feedback is also used in this process. All theses reviewed by the panel had been assessed - in accordance with faculty policy - by two examiners. These are also involved in assessing the thesis outline during the LRM thesis module, which the panel welcomes.

What was striking about the list of graduates was that in the past two years, the lowest grade given for an LRM thesis was a 7.3. Most students graduated with an 8.5 or 9 for their thesis. The panel was impressed with the level of the LRM theses and recognized in the viewed 15 works the high level that the graduates achieve (see more under standard 4).

Notwithstanding the above, the panel noticed a significant difference in the amount of feedback on the assessment forms; from very limited to very extensive. Some examiners even enter into discussions with the author at certain points. To the panel, this is a sign of a very thorough

assessment and a student can learn a lot from this feedback. On the other hand, there were also some theses where the feedback was scanty. The panel recommends aligning practice of the different examiners in this respect in such a way that all students receive grades and feedback that are traceable and useful to the student.

#### *Examination Board*

The Department of Law has two examination boards: one for the bachelor's programme and one for the master's programmes. The dean of the faculty appoints the chairperson and members of the examination boards, including an external member, for a term of up to three years. The appointment may be renewed once. The exact duties and roles of the Examination Board are contained in the Regulations of the Master Examination Board.

The department's two Examination Boards have jointly shaped their legal duty to ensure the quality of examinations in various ways. For example, they have issued a number of guidelines including the Guidelines for Assessment Quality in Law, the Guidelines for the Preparation of multiple-choice tests, and more recently the Guidelines on the Online Taking of Written Remote Assessments. These guidelines serve to structure the assessment cycle. They have also installed a Committee on Assessment Quality (CTK). This committee investigates the quality of assessments of individual courses based on samples and pass rates, in response to complaints, or at the request of course coordinators.

Every year the CTK assesses a sample of graduation works including the accompanying assessment forms and, together with the university department of Educational Advice & Training, contributes to the assessment expertise of lecturers by means of the 'Toetskwaliteit Kookboek' (Cookbook of Testing Quality). The cookbook provides recipes for reliable and valid testing for the benefit of teachers who are responsible for designing, administering and grading exams. In 2021, the master's Board of Examiners of the School of Law conducted an internal assessment of LRM and found that the learning objectives of the courses and the exit qualifications of the programme are generally well aligned.

The panel also discussed extensively with the Examination Board the influence of Large Language Models, such as ChatGPT, on education and found that the Examination Board responds adequately to this and is well aware of the major impact artificial intelligence will have on the education of the future. The panel recommends that the knowledge and experience of students be included in the further development of policies in this regard, as some of the students suggested.

In addition, based on its legal duties, the Examination Board appoints examiners to administer the examinations and determine their results. Conditions for being examination authorised are the teacher's substantive and didactic competencies. A doctoral University Lecturer in possession of the BKO is unconditionally appointed as examiner.

All in all, the panel concludes that the Examination Boards and the Examination Quality Committee take their duties very seriously and guarantee the quality of assessments and the level achieved within the programme more than adequately. The panel recommends the management to monitor carefully that the members of the committees receive sufficient time and compensation for their work.

## **Considerations and Judgement**

Judgement: *Meets the standard*

The panel established that the variety of assessment methods ensure that the final qualifications are achieved. All information on assessments is made available to students and teachers in an orderly manner. The quality of assessments in the programmes is more than adequate and appropriate for the academic master's level of the programmes and the assessments adequately cover the learning objectives of the courses and the exit qualifications of the programme. Therefore, the panel concludes that students are thoroughly prepared to finally carry out research independently.

By reading the documentation and interviewing teachers and students, the panel noted with satisfaction that the assessment process of the final thesis is carefully designed, transparent, reliable, and valid. The assessment of the final works uses clear and relevant criteria, laid out in a uniform assessment form with a specification of the criteria. All theses reviewed by the panel had been assessed by two examiners.

The panel, however, noticed a significant difference in the amount of feedback on the assessment forms. The panel recommends aligning practice of the different examiners in this respect in such a way that all students receive grades and feedback that are traceable and useful to them.

The panel has established that the Examination Boards and the Examination Quality Committee take their duties very seriously and guarantee the quality of assessments and the level achieved within the programme more than adequately. The panel noted that the (time) compensation for the work done by the Board and Quality Committee seem to be rather low and recommends the management to reconsider if more compensation is necessary for the continuation of their effective functioning.

Based on the mostly positive findings, the panel concludes that the programme achieves basic quality for standard 3. Accordingly, the panel arrives at the judgment "meets the standard" for Standard 3 'assessment'.

#### 4.4. Achieved learning outcomes

**Standard 4: The programme demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.**

Explanation: The achievement of the intended learning outcomes is demonstrated by the results of tests, the final projects, and the performance of graduates in actual practice or in postgraduate programmes.

#### Findings

##### *Quality of final theses*

The panel saw some extraordinarily impressive works, some of which are publishable and a few of which would not even be out of place as dissertations. The panel came across theses on important and timely topics. For example, one of the theses made it clear that the student not only acquired technical knowledge about AI and was able to translate it in an excellent way for a broader legally educated audience, but also did a very good job of linking it to the legal aspects of liability. Another thesis provided a wonderful combination between legal dogmatic and legal philosophical research, and yet another student not only took a dogmatic approach to the topic under study, but also conducted extensive empirical research. The theses convinced the panel that the exit of the programme achieve a high level of academic knowledge and research skills and convincingly reach the exit qualifications.

##### *Functioning alumni*

Many graduates continue their research career after completing the LRM by writing a PhD dissertation. Others obtain jobs in the legal profession, in particular as lawyers in law firms or as in-house lawyers in companies or with the government. A final group of graduates end up in highly-qualified positions of a different nature – research-related or otherwise – for example in the scientific bureau of the Netherlands Supreme Court, in NGOs or in international institutions or as policy officers with government bodies.

The strong scientific orientation of the LRM is evidenced by the fact that many graduates obtain PhD positions, either within the School of Law or in other universities and institutions in the Netherlands and abroad. Of the students who graduated between January 2016 and April 2022, 8 students obtained a PhD position at the School of Law of Utrecht University, while 10 found a PhD position either at a different Dutch law school or abroad (e.g. University of Copenhagen, EUI, KU Leuven, University of Hamburg).

Most alumni already find jobs before graduating. The market for LRM students who want to obtain a PhD position is slightly more limited, since there is much (international) competition for such positions and there are few positions available within the School of Law itself. Nevertheless, most students who really want to continue working in academia have managed to secure a position, either in the Netherlands or abroad, often after a short period of working as a junior lecturer.

The Legal Research master's programme has a strongly connected community of students and alumni. Alumni (especially recent graduates) remain actively involved with the LRM, for example by attending information activities or meetings on career prospects. The LRM and the student association Aletheia organise an annual event for LRM alumni and alumni are invited to certain activities, such as lectures and the annual LRM conference.

The panel concludes from the preparatory documents and the meetings during its site-visit that upon completion of the master's programme, graduates are in a good position to begin an academic career as a PhD student or pursue a career outside academic research.

## **Considerations and Judgement**

Judgement: *Meets the standard*

The panel was impressed with the level of the LRM theses. It saw some extraordinarily impressive works, some of which are publishable and a few of which would not even be out of place as dissertations. The theses convinced the panel that the graduates of the programme achieve a high level of academic knowledge and research skills and convincingly reach the exit qualifications.

Many graduates continue their research career after completing the LRM by writing a PhD dissertation. Others obtain jobs in law firms, as in-house lawyers or policy advisors in companies or with the government, in the scientific bureau of the Netherlands Supreme Court, in NGOs or in international institutions. The fact that most alumni already find jobs before graduating and that even in the more limited market for PhD positions graduates of the programme find positions, proves to the panel that the exit qualifications and the high ambitions of the programme are achieved. The panel concludes from the preparatory documents and the meetings that upon completion of the master's programme, graduates are in a good position to begin an academic career as a PhD student or pursue a career outside academic research. It is also happy to see that the Legal Research master's programme has a strongly connected community of students and alumni.

Based on the positive findings, the panel concludes that the programme achieves basic quality for standard 4. Accordingly, the panel arrives at the judgment "meets" for Standard 4 'Achieved learning outcomes'.

## 5. OVERALL CONCLUSION

Based on the fact that the panel assesses standards 1 and 2, 3 and 4 for the master's programme *Legal Research* with 'meets the standard', the panel arrives - based on the decision rules for the NVAO's Limited Programme Assessment – at the final assessment of **'positive'** for Utrecht University academic master's programme Legal Research as a whole. The audit panel therefore advises the NVAO to maintain the accreditation of the programme.

## **6. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The panel encourages the programme to continue paying attention to the right balance between flexibility for the students and teaching them to finish a research project in a limited amount of time.
- The panel recommends aligning practice of the different examiners in respect to the amount of feedback given on the assessment forms of the final thesis, in such a way that all students receive grades and feedback that are traceable and useful to the student.

**ANNEX I****Overview of judgements**

Overview of the panel's judgements Utrecht University Master's Programme Legal Research Full-time	
Standard	Judgement
Standaard 1. Intended learning outcomes	Meets the standard
Standaard 2. Teaching-learning environment	Meets the standard
Standaard 3. Student assessment	Meets the standard
Standaard 4. Achieved learning outcomes	Meets the standard
Overall judgement	Positive



## ANNEX II

## Programme of site-visit

**Visitation programme of the limited programme assessment for the bachelor's and master's programme in law - Utrecht University - February 5-7, 2024<sup>2</sup>**

February 5, 2024		
9.30	10.00	Welcome
10.00	12.00	Internal panel meeting
12.00	12.30	Lunch
12.30	13.00	Meeting with the faculty board
13.10	13.55	Meeting with programme managers of the Ba Rechtsgeleerdheid
14.00	14.45	Meeting with students of the Ba Rechtsgeleerdheid
14.55	15.40	Meeting with lecturers of the Ba Rechtsgeleerdheid
15.40	16.30	Internal panel meeting
16.30	17.45	Meeting with the Examination Board (Ba + Ma)
17.45	18.15	Internal panel meeting
February 6, 2024		
8.45	9.15	Internal panel meeting
9.15	10.00	Meeting with programme managers of the 3 Dutch master's programmes
10.05	11.05	Meeting with students of the 3 Dutch master's programmes
11.15	12.15	Meeting with lecturers of the 3 Dutch master's programmes
12.15	13.15	Lunch
13.15	14.00	Meeting with programme managers of the 3 English master's programmes
14.05	15.05	Meeting with students from the 3 English master's programmes
15.15	16.15	meeting with lecturers from the 3 English master's programmes
16.15	17.00	Internal panel meeting
17.00	17.30	Meeting with alumni from the English-language programmes
17.30	18.00	Meeting with alumni from the Dutch-language programmes
Februari 7, 2024		
8.45	9.30	Internal panel meeting
9.30	10.00	Meeting with programme managers of the Legal Research Master
10.05	10.35	Meeting with students of the Legal Research Master
10.45	11.15	Meeting with students of the Legal Research Master
11.15	12.00	Internal panel meeting
12.00	12.30	Block for pending issues / additional meeting
12.30	13.30	Lunch
13.30	14.15	Final meeting with management
14.15	16.45	Drafting the findings
16.45	17.15	Plenary oral feedback of the findings

<sup>2</sup> 'NB. For privacy reasons, the names are not included in this report. The names of auditees are known to the secretary of the audit panel.

## **Methodology**

From 5 -7 February, 2024, the bachelor's and master's degree programmes in Law at Utrecht University were assessed by an independent peer review panel as part of the visitation group Rechten, sub-cluster WO Rechten 2. This sub-cluster consisted of 20 programmes from Utrecht University, Tilburg University and Leiden University. The assessment of the programmes in question were based on the 'Assessment framework for accreditation system for higher education in the Netherlands' adopted by the NVAO in September 2018. This sets out the standards on which the assessment panel should focus in the limited programme assessment of a programme and the criteria on the basis of which the assessment panel should determine its assessment of the programme.

On behalf of the cluster WO Rechten 2, the quality assurance agency Hobéon supervised the assessment. Inge van der Hoorn and Meg van Bogaert acted as coordinator and Meg van Bogaert and Hester Minnema were secretary within the sub-cluster. All three of them were trained and registered as secretaries by the NVAO.

Prior to the visitation, the sub-cluster coordinators informed the visitation panel in detail about the assessment framework and procedure and the attitude expected of them before, during and after the visitation. The coordinators also ensured calibration of the visitation panel by discussing the interpretation of the standards, judgements and decision rules. During the assessment process, the secretary monitored the correct process, ensured that the panel's judgements were made in accordance with the NVAO framework and supported the process of forming judgements.

Based on the documentation provided by the university, the panel was able to form a picture of the primary and secondary processes of the programmes in question. Prior to the site visit, the panel members studied the documentation received and sent their findings to the secretary. The secretary collected the panel's questions and comments in a document and distributed it to the panel members. In addition, the programme sent a list of graduates covering the period 2021 - 2023 to the coordinators, who selected 15 final works per programme (total of 45 for the 3 English-language master programmes) in consultation with the chairperson. In making the selection, they took into account the distribution of subprogrammes, final grades and assessors. Prior to the visit, the programmes made the selected theses with accompanying assessment forms available to the panel.

During a preliminary internal panel meeting, the panel discussed the information file and underlying documents and the preliminary findings of the different members. Moreover, the review panel's findings on the theses were also shared among the panel members during the preliminary consultation.

## **Site-visit**

During the site-visit the panel focused on verifying the findings from the document analysis and obtaining additional information on the content of the programmes. This was done through discussions with representatives of the programmes, students and the professional field, which could be characterised as 'peer-to-peer discussions'. The verification by the review panel took place by discussing the same topic several times with different stakeholders and on the basis of additional documentation.

The panel reviewed the draft programme for the site-visit and provided feedback on it. After consultation with the relevant master's programmes, the panel determined the choice of interlocutors in compliance with the NVAO rules to this effect.

The review panel offered students, lecturers and others involved in the programmes who were not included in the programme of the site-visit the opportunity to draw attention to issues they considered important for the assessment. The review panel found that the university brought

the opportunity to do so to their attention in a timely and proper manner and informed them on how to contact the secretary of the panel. The panel received no responses.

### **Coordination of subpanels within the cluster**

The reviews within the cluster WO Rechten 2 (Utrecht University, Tilburg University, Leiden University) are all conducted under the supervision of Hobéon. The three universities in this cluster have agreed that the chair and two panel members form the core panel. They participate in all three reviews and they thus ensure an equal method of assessment. Coordination between all subpanels also took place through a joint instruction on the working method and on the assessment framework to all panel members involved in the visitations in the cluster WO Rechten 2.

A first version of the assessment report was drafted by the secretary and circulated among the members of the panel for review and comments. The final draft was subsequently forwarded to the institute to correct factual inaccuracies.

### **Assessment rules**

#### *Limited framework*

Hobéon applied the decision rules, as listed in the "Assessment Framework for higher education accreditation system Netherlands, September 2018. According to the NVAO assessment rules a standard meets, partially meets or does not meet the standard. In addition, the Guidelines NVAO assessment of research master's programmes (2015) and the *Nadere uitwerking aanvullende criteria onderzoeksmasters (30 May 2016)* were applied.

### **Final conclusion**

**Positive:** The programme meets all the standards.

**Conditionally positive:** The programme meets standard 1 and partially meets a maximum of two standards, with the imposition of conditions being recommended by the panel (see Additional assessment rules regarding conditions).

#### **Negative:**

In the following situations:

- The programme fails to meet one or more standards;
- The programme partially meets standard 1;
- The programme partially meets one or two standards, without the imposition of conditions being recommended by the panel;
- The programme partially meets three or more standards.

## **ANNEX III**

### **List of documents examined**

#### **List of documents examined:**

- Self-evaluation Report
- Domain-specific Reference Framework for Law (DSRK)
- Schematic programme overview
- Content description of a representative selection of programme components, including mention of learning objectives, instruction methods, literature (required/recommended), teachers involved and credits
- Education and Examination Regulations (OER)
- Overview of staff deployed: Name, position, degree and expertise, educational qualifications obtained.
- Overview of all recent final works
- Regulations and annual reports Examination Board 2021-2022 and 2022-2023
- Faculty regulation BKO
- Faculty regulation SKO
- Assessment policy School of Law (REBO)
- Assessments and assessment criteria and norms (answer models) and a representative selection of assessments made (exams, presentations, papers, assessments, portfolio's, etc) and their grading.

Following NVAO regulations prior to the site-visit the panel has reviewed 15 students' final LRM theses, including assessment criteria, grading and feedback rendered. For privacy reasons, the names of these graduates and their student numbers are not included in this report. The names of the graduates, their student number, as well as the titles of the final projects, are known to the secretary of the audit panel.

## ANNEX IV

### Composition of the audit panel

On January 31, 2024, the NVAO approved the composition of the review panel for the assessment of the B Law programmes and the M Dutch Law, the M Notarial Law, the M Business and Law, the M European Law, the M Law & Economics, the M Public International Law and the M Legal Research of Utrecht University, under the number PA-1484. These programmes belong to the visitation group below.

Name visitation group:	WO Rechten 2
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The table below provides brief job descriptions of the panel members who participated in the review panel of the programme described in this assessment report.

Name	Brief job description	Role
Prof. mr. Anja Oskamp	Former rector magnificus of the Open Universiteit	Chair
Prof. dr. Ramses Wessel	Vice dean and professor of European Law at the University of Groningen.	Member
Prof. mr. Edgar du Perron	Counselor at the Supreme Court and professor of Private Law at the University of Amsterdam	Member
Prof. mr. dr. Wilma Duijst	Professor of forensic medicine and health criminal law at Maastricht University	Member
Prof. mr. dr. Bert Marseille	Professor of Administrative Law at the University of Groningen	Member
Otto Heijboer	Student at the European Law School of Maastricht University	Student member
Prof. Sebastiaan Roes BA, MA, LLB,LLM, DJur (Phd)	Professor at the Department of Notarial Law at Radboud University Nijmegen	Thesis reviewer
Mr. dr. Marelle Attinger	University lecturer in Criminal (procedural) Law at the Open University	Thesis reviewer
Dr. Thomas Vandamme	University lecturer in European Law at the University of Amsterdam	Thesis reviewer
Prof. mr. Ben Schuijling	Professor of Civil Law at the Radboud University Nijmegen	Thesis reviewer
Dr. Margaretha Wewerinke-Singh	Associate Professor of Sustainability Law at the University of Amsterdam and lecturer at the Pacific Centre for Environment and Sustainable Development (Port Vila, Vanuata)	Thesis reviewer
Prof. dr. Michael Faure LLM	Professor Comparative Private Law and Economics at the Erasmus University Rotterdam and professor Comparative and International Environmental Law at Maastricht University	Thesis reviewer
Dr. Joseph Powderly	Associate Professor of Public International Law at the Grotius Centre for International Legal Studies at Leiden University	Thesis reviewer
Prof. dr. Bram Akkermans	Professor of Property Law and programme director of the Dutch-language undergraduate programmes at Maastricht University	Thesis reviewer
Dr. Meg van Bogaert	Independent consultant and NVAO registered secretary	Proces coordinator
Mr. Hester Minnema	Independent consultant and NVAO registered secretary	Secretary
Inge van der Hoorn MSc	Consultant at Hobéon and NVAO registered secretary	Logistic coordinator

The independence and confidentiality declarations signed by all panel members are in Hobéon's possession. In this declaration, the panel members declare not to have had, for at least five years prior to the audit, any business or personal connection with the institution concerned - other than that in the context of work as a member of the review panel of the quality assurance agency - that could influence, for better or worse, an independent judgement.



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