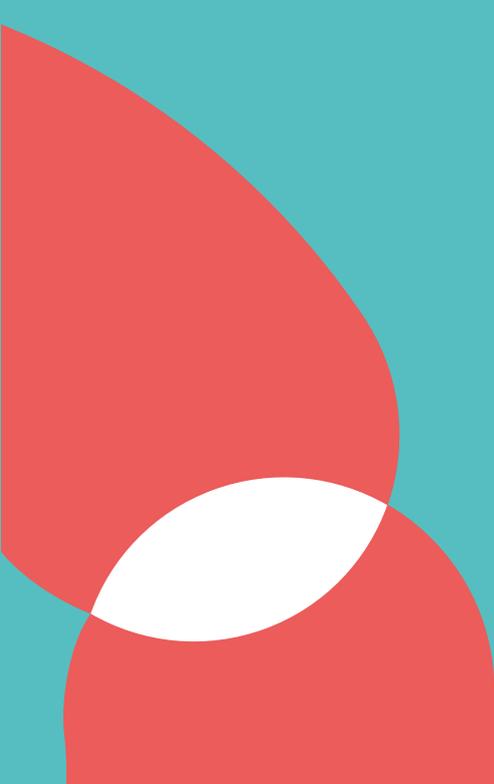




NVAO • THE NETHERLANDS

**INITIAL ACCREDITATION**  
MASTER DEVELOPMENT STUDIES  
Erasmus University Rotterdam

ADVISORY REPORT  
24 SEPTEMBER 2025



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## 1 Peer Review

The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) assesses the quality of a new programme through a peer review process. This initial accreditation is mandatory for an institution that seeks to award a recognised degree upon the successful completion of a study programme.

The procedure for accrediting new programmes differs somewhat from that for existing programmes that have already been accredited. Initial accreditation serves as an ex ante assessment of a programme's quality. Once accredited, the new programme becomes subject to the standard review process for existing programmes.

The quality of a new programme is assessed by means of peer review. A panel of independent peers, including a student, reviews the plans during a site visit to the institution. A discussion amongst peer experts forms the basis for the panel's final judgement and advisory report. The focus is on the curriculum, the teaching and learning environment, and student assessment. The agenda for the panel visit and the documents reviewed are available from the NVAO office upon request.

The peer review outcome is guided by the standards outlined and published in the NVAO Assessment framework for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands (Staatscourant 2024, nr. 6405). Each standard is evaluated on a three-point scale: meets, partially meets, or does not meet the standard. Based on this evaluation, the panel will rate the programme's overall quality as positive, conditionally positive, or negative.

NVAO makes the decision on the programme's quality based on this advisory report. This accreditation decision can be positive, conditionally positive or negative. If the decision is positive, with or without conditions, the institution may proceed to offer the new programme. Graduates of the programme will then be entitled to receive a legally accredited degree.

This report presents the panel's findings, analysis and judgements resulting from the peer review. It also details the commendations and recommendations for follow-up actions. A summary report highlighting the main outcomes of the peer review is also available.

Both the full and summary reports of each peer review are published on NVAO's website [www.nvao.net](http://www.nvao.net). There you can also find more information about NVAO and peer reviews of new programmes.

## 2 New Programme

### 2.1 General data

<b>Institution</b>	Erasmus University Rotterdam
<b>Programme</b>	Development Studies
<b>Variants</b>	Fulltime
<b>Degree</b>	Master of Arts (MA)
<b>Tracks</b>	Environment Track, Development Economics Track, Social Justice Track, Politics & Governance Track, Social Innovation Track
<b>Locations</b>	The Hague
<b>Study load</b>	60 EC <sup>1</sup>

### 2.2 Profile

The master in Development Studies (MADS) at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) is an interdisciplinary programme addressing urgent global challenges through critical, context-sensitive approaches. This master programme is a renewed version of the previously existing master in Development Studies at ISS. The internationally recognised ISS is part of the Erasmus University Rotterdam and located in The Hague. The renewed programme has focus on inclusive development, social justice, and just transitions. The programme prepares students from diverse professional and cultural backgrounds for academic or practice-oriented careers in the field of development. Core themes include political economy, decolonisation, feminist perspectives, sustainability, migration, conflict, economic development, gender, and digital transformation. Students tailor their study paths through electives and thesis topics, supported by expert staff and mentors. Graduates will be equipped with analytical, research, and communication skills to work effectively across academia, governmental sectors and NGOs worldwide.

### 2.3 Panel

#### Peer experts

1. Frederik De Decker (chair), Manager Functional Domain Internationalisation, University Service Education and Research, Ghent University (Belgium)
2. Prof. dr. Bereket Kebede (member), Professor in Behavioural Economics, School of Global Development University of East Anglia (United Kingdom)
3. Dr. Mieke Lopes Cardozo (member), Associate Professor in Regenerative Education and Development, International Development Studies/Governance of Inclusive Development University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands)
4. Ellemijn Egberink (Student member), Student bachelor International Business Maastricht University (The Netherlands)

#### Assisting staff

1. Eva de Haan MSc MEd, secretary
2. Anne Klaas Schilder MA, NVAO policy advisor and process coordinator

#### Site visit

The Hague, July 16, 2025

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<sup>1</sup> European Credits

### 3 Outcome

The NVAO approved panel reached a positive conclusion regarding the quality of the master Development Studies offered by Erasmus University Rotterdam. The programme meets all standards of the NVAO framework.

The master in Development Studies examines the field of development with emphasis on inclusive development, social justice, equity, and the need for just transitions. Students engage critically with both mainstream and alternative approaches, including decolonial, feminist and degrowth perspectives, and learn to analyse complex social, political, ecological and economic transformations. The programme leverages its diverse international classroom and location in The Hague to connect theory with practice through study visits, guest lectures, and opportunities for practice-based research. The panel found that the programme demonstrates a high degree of academic quality, relevance, and coherence. It is grounded in a strong interdisciplinary tradition and clearly meets the expected master's level. The intended learning outcomes reflect current debates in development studies and promote the acquisition of advanced academic and professional competences. Students are challenged to critically engage with global issues such as decolonisation, environmental justice, and social inequality through a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach.

What stands out is the programme's deep international character. Internationalisation is integrated into the vision as well as the pedagogical and operational aspects of the programme. The international diversity of the student body, the teaching staff, and the academic content create a genuinely global classroom, where learning takes place through exposure to, and dialogue between, multiple perspectives. The teaching-learning environment is small in scale and allows for personal contact between staff and students. Small-scale, interactive teaching methods, team-teaching, and interdisciplinary dialogue are hallmarks of the programme's pedagogical approach. Students appreciate the space they are given to shape their own trajectories through electives, internship and thesis specialisation. Students describe their learning experience at ISS as both intellectually transformative and personally meaningful.

While the programme's strengths are substantial, the panel also identified opportunities for improvement, without detracting from the quality of the programme. Learning outcomes that refer to international and intercultural competencies could be made more explicit and consistently reflected in course-level objectives and assessment practices. The programme's strategic goals in internationalisation would benefit from clearer articulation and the use of measurable indicators to support ongoing monitoring and improvement.

The renewed programme offers new tracks, which offer more flexibility to students. This change means that coordination among course coordinators and integrating key themes across electives should receive renewed attention. In addition, while the current assessment system is well structured and fair, the programme would benefit from diversifying its assessment formats to include more reflective, peer-based, and oral components. These forms align with the programme's student-centred philosophy and make assessment robust against misuse of generative AI.

In conclusion, the panel was impressed by the academic quality, critical orientation, and strong international embedding of the master Development Studies. The programme offers students a dynamic, inclusive, and challenging environment in which to explore and contribute to the field of development. It meets all criteria for initial accreditation and, in the panel's view, fully merits recognition for the Distinctive Quality Feature of Internationalisation.

Standard	Judgement
1. Intended learning outcomes	meets the standard
2. Teaching-learning environment	meets the standard
3. Student assessment	meets the standard
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>Positive</b>

## 4 Commendations

The programme is commended for the following features of good practice.

1. Strong international culture throughout the programme - The programme demonstrates an exemplary commitment to internationalisation, both in vision and practice. The diverse student and staff composition, globally relevant curriculum, and consistent engagement with international stakeholders create a rich and inclusive learning environment.
2. Deep embedding of interdisciplinarity and critical orientation - Integration of themes such as decolonisation, degrowth, feminist and environmental justice challenge students to engage deeply and reflectively with complex global issues.
3. Small-scale and student-centred learning environment - The learning environment combines academic rigour with personal guidance, offers flexibility in study paths, and attention to wellbeing.
4. Rigorous assessment practice - The programme has a strong Board of Examiners and makes use of external examiners to connect to practice.
5. Diverse and experienced teaching staff - The academic team brings together a rich blend of disciplinary backgrounds, international experience, and Global South representation.

## 5 Recommendations

The panel recommends several follow-up actions to improve the programme further. These recommendations do not detract from the positive assessment of the programme's quality.

1. Formalise the explicit formulation and review of internationalisation goals - Formulate international and intercultural learning outcomes more explicitly in programme-level and course-level learning outcomes and establish a process for periodic review.
2. Emphasise transcultural learning and assessment - Strengthen the programme's approach to transcultural education by developing more diverse, creative and formative assessment practices that make the achievement of transcultural competences more visible and measurable.
3. Strengthen learning paths within the curriculum - Improve coordination across courses to create clearer links between courses and reduce potential content overlap.
4. Refer explicitly to behavioural science within the programme – Next to the dedicated course on this subject, refer to behavioural science within other courses to help prepare students for the future of development studies.
5. Use more variety in assessment methods – Explore alternatives to traditional written assignments and further incorporate more reflective, process-based, and collaborative assessment forms.

## 6 Assessment

### 6.1 Standard 1: Intended learning outcomes

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

#### **Judgement**

Meets the standard.

#### **Findings, analysis and considerations**

##### *Intended learning outcomes*

The panel finds that the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) of the master in Development Studies are well-formulated and comprehensive. The ILOs require students to demonstrate mastery of key development theories, critical reflection on global issues such as decolonisation and sustainability, and advanced research skills, including qualitative and quantitative methods. Additionally, the ILOs highlight transferable skills such as academic writing, intercultural communication, and ethical reasoning, which are essential for both academic and professional contexts. The multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives align well with ISS's vision on the nature of the field of Development Studies. The ILOs are clear and well-aligned with the Dublin descriptors. They reflect the interdisciplinary and international orientation of the programme and integrate theoretical, methodological, and professional competencies. The panel concludes that the academic master's level is well described in the ILOs, matching the Dutch quality reference framework NLQF 7.

During the site visit, the panel learned from programme management and faculty that the revision from 88 EC to 60 EC sharpened the focus of the ILOs. The renewed ILOs ensure that the programme can be realistically achieved within one academic year. The panel finds that the programme has a good balance between critical theory and practical applications, combined with sufficient academic rigor. The panel considers the ILOs appropriate and complete but advises the programme to make international and intercultural competencies more visible in formal documentation and link them explicitly to the assessment framework. The programme as a whole, the staff and the student body clearly embody the international character of the programme. The panel would like to derive this more directly from the formulation of the ILOs as well.

Compared to the previous program, the new master in Development Studies strengthens the practical aspect, which helps cater for emerging trends. The renewed programme ensures that the programme is better aligned with the changing demands of incoming students. In recent years, the existing MADS programme noticed that incoming students needed less foundational courses than before. This has to do with the changing student population, who now choose to do the MADS programme directly after their prior education, instead of gaining work experience first. This change allows for more focus in the renewed programme, while the depth of the programme remains intact. Students and alumni confirmed that the current programme makes them feel well-prepared for academic research, policy-oriented work, and professional practice in international contexts. They expect that the renewed programme will also meet these expectations, while making the programme more manageable.

##### *Professional field*

The panel appreciates that the intended learning outcomes were formulated in consultation with external stakeholders, including NGOs, policy institutions, and alumni of the predecessor of the programme. Employers interviewed by the panel expressed confidence that graduates possess the necessary analytical and contextual skills to address complex development challenges. The programme organises annual reviews by peer external examiners to help the internal discussion on what distinguishes the proposed one-year programme from other master programmes in Development Studies. The programme is aligned with national and international benchmarks of similar programmes and attuned to the learning outcomes of the programme accordingly.

##### *International requirements*

The panel finds that the ILOs correspond with the requirements of comparable international programmes in development studies. The objectives are well aligned with the domain-specific framework for Development

Studies as formulated by the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI). The ILOs explicitly reference global debates on social justice, inequality, and decolonisation, and ensure that graduates are prepared to operate in multicultural professional environments. The panel was provided with both national and international benchmarks of similar programmes and concludes that the proposed renewed programme is aligned with international programmes in terms of learning goals.

In summary, the ILOs reflect the mission of the programme to educate professionals in the international and changing field of development. Students are offered a balanced academic and professionally relevant training in theory and methods for development studies. Graduates will be capable of applying the acquired interdisciplinary and internationally oriented knowledge and expertise. There is also sufficient attention to the development of ethical attitudes, contextual awareness and (inter)personal skills. From the information file, it is clear to the panel that the development team formulated the ILOs in accordance with the relevant national and international standards. The new programme clearly continues the well respected and internationally reputable tradition of the ISS in general and the MADS programme more specifically. The highly interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary content of the courses and the academic staff at ISS are important strengths. The panel is confident that based on the ILOs, graduates will be well-equipped to become knowledgeable professionals in the broader field of development studies.

## 6.2 Standard 2: Teaching-learning environment

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

### Judgement

Meets the standard.

### Findings, analysis and considerations

#### *Curriculum*

The master in Development Studies is an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary master programme with a focus on inclusive development, social justice, equity, and the need for just transitions. The programme offers five optional tracks: the Environment Track, Development Economics Track, Social Justice Track, Politics & Governance Track and Social Innovation Track. The aim of the tracks is to help students structure their programme by pre-selecting a set of elective courses and a related thesis topic. The programme is located at ISS in the Hague, in close proximity of policy and justice organisations. The core philosophy of the master in Development Studies is the co-creation of excellence, in research and in teaching. This is translated within the programme, as perspectives from the Global South are applied to the North, as well as vice versa. The programme embodies co-creation and excels in inclusion and diversity in teaching content, and among staff and student population.

The panel finds that the curriculum of the master in Development Studies is coherent, well-structured, and enables students to achieve the intended learning outcomes. The programme is organised into four blocks: core theoretical courses, research methods, electives, and the master's thesis. The first block provides a shared foundation in development theory and introduces critical perspectives on global challenges. Courses such as Histories and Theories of Development and Grand Challenges in Development Studies establish a strong theoretical base. The second block focuses on research methodology, where students develop skills in both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The second and third block allow students to specialise through electives that fit with the chosen track. In the second and third block there are 17 electives offered, ranging from topics of human rights, economic analysis, political economy, feminism, migration and social justice. The final fourth block is devoted to the thesis, enabling students to conduct independent research on a topic of their choice. From the panel discussions it seemed that the reworking of the programme creates a renewed need to align courses. While the panel is very positive about the teaching and learning environment, it encourages the programme to further strengthen horizontal integration between courses within the new tracks. In this way, the learning paths within each track can be strengthened and any potential overlap between courses is reduced.

The panel sees the learning outcomes of the programme translated into the different courses and final thesis. There are several electives that are more practical, offering choice and variation in more theoretical and more

applied courses. This choice respects the differences of the incoming students and offers sufficient choice for specialisation. The programme aids in making choices within the programme through mentoring. The proposed tracks are well-defined and further aid students in selecting a coherent set of courses within the programme. There is a good spread of topics and specialisations present, but the panel advises to also include sufficient elements of behavioural science within the different tracks since in the changing field of development studies there is an increasing importance of including behavioural science. Although the programme features an elective of behavioural perspectives, the panel recommends including behavioural science in other courses as well. Within the field of development studies there is an emerging need for the incorporation of insights from behavioural science. The panel also sees potential to further enhance students' self-directed learning, and self-assessment/reflection skills, for instance through co-creative pedagogical approaches which invite a collaborative learning environment co-constructed between staff and students.

#### *Teaching staff*

The panel was appreciative of the quality and diversity of the teaching staff. Faculty members bring expertise from a wide range of disciplines, such as political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, and environmental studies. This further strengthens the inter- and multidisciplinary culture at ISS. The staff also brings professional experience in NGOs, policy organisations, and international research projects, further enriching the study environment. The robust and international research undertaken by the academic staff clearly builds into a strong learning environment for the students. From the staff overview provided in the information file, it is noted that only 15% of the teaching staff is still in the process of obtaining their University Teaching Qualification (UTQ). All other staff has either completed the UTQ or the advanced Senior Teaching Qualification, or received a waiver based on prior experience. The panel believes this shows the commitment to quality education and a learning attitude, also for staff.

The teaching staff's diversity also reflects the global orientation of the programme. During the site visit, students expressed appreciation for having lecturers from both the Global North and Global South, which provides exposure to multiple perspectives and fosters epistemological pluralism. Staff confirmed that they work collaboratively in course teams, ensuring that interdisciplinary connections are embedded throughout the curriculum. The panel applauds the programme's dedication to internationalisation, which is also clearly visible in the staff composition.

#### *Educational approach*

The programme's educational approach is characterised by small-scale, interactive teaching and a strong emphasis on critical debate and peer learning. Students reported that seminars often involve case-based discussions where they analyse development challenges from different regional and disciplinary perspectives. Students are immersed in an international environment, with both students and staff from diverse backgrounds. Students of the current programme and alumni explained to the panel that the different perspectives within the classroom are of great added value to their experience in the programme. Beyond the course content, the class discussions with students from diverse backgrounds truly enriched their experience and leverage the international character of the programme.

Diversity is at the core of the didactical concept of the programme. Because many incoming students have some work experience in a relevant field, or relevant life-experience, the discussions in class can go well beyond textbook approaches and solutions to development issues. Students are encouraged to analyse, remain open-minded, to develop their own (critical and reflexive) positions, and to appropriately communicate those by contributing to discussions and addressing complex issues. The panel applauds this approach and is confident that internationalisation and diversity are values that are strongly upheld by the programme and its management.

The panel observed how the international classroom is deliberately leveraged as a pedagogical tool. Group assignments bring together students from diverse professional and cultural backgrounds, encouraging cross-cultural collaboration. For instance, in the course Policy Analysis, Design and Implementation, students work in mixed teams to draft policy analyses, which allows them to learn directly from each other's expertise and lived experiences. The diverse nationalities and perspective are at the core of the educational approach of the programme. The panel recognises that this is at the core of the philosophy of the programme and recognises the truly international hallmark of the programme.

### *Facilities and location*

The programme benefits from its location in The Hague, the International City of Peace and Justice. Students have access to international organisations, NGOs, and policy institutes, which enrich their academic experience. The panel observed that the ISS building offers modern classrooms, collaborative study spaces, and a library with extensive resources in development studies. Students also highlighted the accessibility of academic and administrative staff, facilitated by the small-scale environment of the institute.

Because the proposed programme is a re-working of the existing programme in Development Studies, the panel was able to speak with current students and alumni of the previous 88 EC programme. This helped get valuable insight on the current experience and on the proposed new programme from a student perspective. During the site visit students confirmed that the curriculum successfully integrates theory and practice. For example, one student described how a thesis project conducted in collaboration with an NGO in The Hague allowed them to apply their research training to a real-world problem, bridging academic learning with professional experience. These components will remain in the new programme and are of great added value for students.

### *Student support*

The panel found the student support system to be personal and supportive. Each student is assigned an academic mentor who provides guidance on course selection, thesis development, and career planning. Students spoke highly of this mentoring system, with one student describing it as a crucial part of feeling supported both academically and personally. From alumni surveys, it is clear that students would appreciate more help transitioning from studying to employment. The programme could build their support platforms to leverage their network of alumni around the world. This helps students to see the diverse career pathways after their studies and encourages mentorship opportunities.

In addition, the student welfare office provides specific support services, including counselling and support for students with special needs. The welfare office organises an introduction programme for students, focusing on intercultural communication and settling in in a different culture. During the study programme, study trips, activities, cultural events such as exhibitions, movie sessions or an international evening are organised. A designated confidential adviser is available for professional and personal support. The panel was pleased to hear that these services are well-used and highly valued by students.

### *Professional field*

The panel considers the integration of practice-based learning a notable strength of the teaching-learning environment. Guest lectures by professionals from renowned organisations expose students to real-world policy debates. Furthermore, study visits to institutions in The Hague and student participation in external conferences connect academic learning to professional practice. The panel spoke to staff, alumni and members of the professional field during the site visit. This left the impression that the connection between the programme and the professional field is strong. The potential employers of alumni confirmed the need for and the high quality of the programme and its graduates.

### *Distinctive Quality Feature Internationalisation and English language*

The academic community around the programme is inherently interdisciplinary and internationally oriented, and the staff and student community are international. English is used as the standard language among the relevant stakeholders across the world. The programme is characterised by crossing the boundaries of different disciplines and strengthening the links between these disciplines. The programme maintains strong partnerships with worldwide partners. This is done through staff exchange with partner universities, long-standing collaborations in the professional field and opportunities for students to do dual degree and exchange programmes within their studies at ISS.

The programme delivers graduates who will provide substantial and potentially leading contributions in multidisciplinary teams with people from different backgrounds. To prepare students for working in these interdisciplinary and international teams, the programme is offered in an international classroom setting and English is the common language. Offering the programme in English allows students to develop the ability to cooperate and communicate in the global professional context. The panel therefore supports the choice for

English as the standard language of the programme. Because of the inherently international character of the programme, the panel proposes to award the Distinctive Feature Internationalisation through the Certificate for Quality in Internalisation (CeQuint). For this purpose, a separate report has been created, in accordance with the standards of the European Consortium for Accreditation of higher education.

The panel concludes that the proposed teaching and learning environment of the master Development Studies is of high quality and provides students with all the necessary conditions to achieve the programme's intended learning outcomes. The curriculum is clearly structured across four blocks and offers a well-considered balance between theory, research skills, personal specialisation, and applied learning. The international classroom, small-scale seminar setting, and diverse and skilled academic staff together create a stimulating and inclusive study environment. Students benefit greatly from strong mentoring and welfare support. The programme's location in The Hague ensures close links with the professional field. The introduction of thematic tracks offers students structure and coherence in their electives and thesis choices. The panel encourages the programme to further enhance horizontal integration between courses and to embed behavioural science perspectives and co-creative pedagogical approaches focused on enhancing self-directed learning and student agency more broadly across the curriculum.

### 6.3 Standard 3: Student assessment

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

#### **Judgement**

Meets the standard.

#### **Findings, analysis and considerations**

##### *Assessment system*

The panel finds that the programme has a clear and robust assessment system. Assessments are aligned with the intended learning outcomes and include a variety of formats, such as essays, policy briefs, oral presentations, and group assignments. Although there are diverse assessments, the programme prioritises individual assessment, which is a common practice in development studies. The panel advises to consider more diverse and co-creative forms of assessment, in line with the philosophy of the programme. Students can be included in the self-assessment of their work, which was confirmed by the alumni and partners. Students can be invited to reflect on and co-construct parts of their curriculum and classroom or excursion activities in close collaboration with staff, to further align learning with students' interests and enhance a sense of agency and ownership over their learning trajectories. In the broader field of development these are crucial skills towards a reflective, professional career and an attitude geared to lifelong learning. The renewed master thesis will introduce an oral defence as an added component. The panel supports this new format to help make the master thesis more robust against misuse of generative AI. The panel suggest to carefully plan the timing of these oral defence moments to ensure proper leave opportunities during the summer period.

##### *Assessment quality and oversight*

The panel was impressed by the role of the Board of Examiners (BoE), who ensure the quality and consistency of assessment. One of the members of the Board of Examiners was strongly involved in making guidelines for use of generative AI on an institutional level. The panel also appreciated the openness of the Board of Examiners towards new ideas to ensure valid and reliable assessment. One of the members of the BoE experimented with giving students AI-generated answers and challenging them to reflect on these answers. These examples of innovative thinking around assessment give the panel confidence that the assessment will continue to be of high quality.

The programme makes use of external examiners and retains a strong connection to the work field, which is appreciated by the panel. The panel recommends considering formative, co-creative and innovative assessment methods. The panel sees that the programme is on the forefront in terms of education but could also make this leap within assessment. Co-creation in assessment can stimulate team-work and collaborative skills between staff and students. Co-creative learning would also align well with the transdisciplinary learning parts of the curriculum (e.g. internships or thesis projects with societal partners), fostering an attitude of collaboration which is important to the field of development studies.

The panel finds that the thesis assessment process of the thesis is rigorous. Two independent examiners assess each thesis, and the oral defence requires students to articulate and defend their research. This approach ensures both academic integrity and a high level of accountability. The BoE organises calibration sessions for thesis supervisors to align grading standards and uses rubrics to provide transparency. During the site visit, staff confirmed that these sessions help ensure fairness and comparability across assessors. This practice is commended by the panel. The panel suggests reviewing the assessment rubric for the thesis to encompass the different types of projects and provide more detailed categories within the rubric.

#### *Academic integrity*

The programme places strong emphasis on academic integrity. Students complete a mandatory academic writing and referencing course at the start of the programme. The use of Turnitin for plagiarism detection is standard, and there is a policy to govern the use of generative AI. In one course, students even analyse AI-generated text to develop their critical digital literacy, which the panel commends as innovative. While the panel considers the assessment system to be robust, it encourages the programme to diversify assessment further by including more reflective assignments, peer review, and portfolio-based approaches. Diversifying the assessment methods helps to obtain a more complete picture of the level of the students, especially when this reduces take-home written assessments which are prone to misuse of generative AI. The panel also recommends explicitly linking international and intercultural competences to the assessment rubrics. This would underscore the programme's global orientation and provide clearer expectations for both students and examiners, highlighting the importance of these competencies in development studies.

#### 6.4 **Standard 4: Intended learning outcomes**

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

#### **Findings, analysis and considerations**

The application for the new master in Development Studies is a reworking of an existing master programme in Development Studies at ISS. In this unique situation, the panel was able to interview current students and alumni of the previous programme. Next to this, the panel was able to review existing master theses and took a sample of 16 theses from the academic years 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. The sample consisted of different majors and different grades, in order to have a full picture of the scope of the thesis work. In the opinion of the panel the review helped to have a more thorough understanding of the plans for the renewed programme. But in view of the application for a new master programme, standard 4 is not explicitly assessed by the panel in this report.

#### *Thesis assessments*

The panel observed several examples of high-quality theses that were well-structured, methodologically sound, and analytically strong. Theses with outstanding grades were reviewed by the panel and praised for its creativity, clarity, and scholarly depth. Another thesis that was reviewed demonstrated outstanding ethnographic skills and critical engagement, which lead to a distinction grade. These examples illustrate that the previous master programme successfully trains students to conduct independent, academically rigorous research and to critically analyse complex global development issues.

At the same time, the panel also noted variation in the quality of theses. While many theses demonstrated excellent analytical and methodological skills, a smaller number of theses showed more limited engagement with theory or lacked sufficient analytical depth. For example, one thesis was found to be largely descriptive and insufficiently critical, while another thesis suffered from methodological weaknesses and limited empirical grounding. In these cases, the panel found that the overall assessment and final grades awarded were appropriate and justified, and the external examiners rightfully endorsed the decisions.

The panel also examined how academic integrity is ensured in thesis work. One case involved the deduction of marks due to unacknowledged use of AI-generated content, illustrating that the programme actively monitors academic integrity and applies appropriate measures. The Board of Examiners confirmed that such cases are handled consistently and transparently. The panel concludes that the previous master in Development Studies demonstrates that its graduates achieve the intended learning outcomes. The panel reviewed a representative

sample of theses from recent cohorts, which reflected a wide range of topics, methodological approaches, and levels of performance.

#### *Alumni survey*

The panel was provided with an alumni survey of graduates from the past years, conducted among alumni who graduated 1, 3, 5, or 10 years ago. The survey shows that the majority of alumni seek and find employment in their country of origin. Employment is typically found at NGOs, in government, in the private sector and in education or research institutes. Alumni highlight the importance of practical experience through internships. Skills that are needed in policy making and policy analysis are deemed as crucial for the programme. The students value a mix of critical theory and practical application, with specialised knowledge to prepare for diverse careers in development, policy and academia. The programme makes an effort to remain in contact with their alumni through means such as social media channels. The panel appreciates the effort of the programme to stay in touch with alumni and openly ask them for feedback on the improvement of the programme.

The panel spoke to several alumni of the previous Development Studies programme. The conversations reinforced their perception that the programme offers rigorous training which prepares students for the labour market. The right knowledge and skill base is offered by the programme. Students did indicate that the programme could do more to help them communicate their research to the outside world. Opportunities to interact with external stakeholders, for example through seminars or conferences, are greatly appreciated by students. Students who were able to take part in international conferences were at an advantage for relevant internships and jobs, but this is not a standard part of the programme. The panel concludes that the achieved learning outcomes confirm the academic quality of the master and validate its position as an internationally competitive master's programme.

Overall, the panel is convinced that the programme delivers graduates who meet the intended learning outcomes at the master's level. The strongest theses show a high degree of academic sophistication and originality, while even the weaker theses demonstrate an adequate level of competence in research design, critical analysis, and academic writing. The inclusion of robust supervision, clear assessment criteria, and oversight by the Board of Examiners ensures that academic standards are upheld.

## 6.5 Degree

The panel advises awarding the following degree to the new programme: Master of Arts.

## Abbreviations

BoE	Board of Examiners
CeQuint	Certificate for Quality in Internationalisation
EADI	European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes
ISS	International Institute of Social Studies
MA	Master of Arts
MADS	Master in Development Studies
NVAO	Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders
UTQ	University Teaching Qualification

This advisory report was written at the request of NVAO and is the outcome of the peer review of the new programme  
Master programme Development Studies  
Erasmus University Rotterdam

Application no: AV-3126

Colophon  
Initial Accreditation Report  
by NVAO NEDERLAND  
Version: 1.01.01 (September 1st 2024)



Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie  
Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders

Parkstraat 83 • 2514 JG Den Haag  
P.O. Box 85498 • 2508 CD The Hague  
The Netherlands

T +31 (0)70 312 23 00  
E [info@nvao.net](mailto:info@nvao.net)  
[www.nvao.net](http://www.nvao.net)