M Development and Rural Innovation
Wageningen University

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Project code P2314

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Summary

Standard 1. Intended learning outcomes

The panel commends the programme for bridging sectors, disciplines, and diverse knowledge systems, thereby addressing an important societal need for professionals capable of working across boundaries. The programme offers students from natural and life sciences a great opportunity to transition into a social science context, equipping them with critical and applied skills that make them hybrid professionals highly relevant to today's dynamic professional landscape. The programme strikes a fine balance between its academic orientation and practical application.

The learning outcomes accurately reflect the orientation and level of the programme. Moving forward, the programme could consider incorporating skills related to emerging digital technologies (including artificial intelligence) in its learning outcomes to ensure that the programme remains relevant and up-to-date.

Standard 2. Teaching-learning environment

The panel finds that the programme's deliberate curriculum structure demonstrates clear strengths in its interdisciplinary and critical approach. The programme combines academic demands with practical application, preparing students for future professional success. The flexible nature of the programme ensures that graduates are equipped for wide-ranging career opportunities in fields that demand interdisciplinary expertise. The panel recommends continuing attracting international students to maintain a culturally diverse student population while also being mindful to address the unique needs and interests of those students coming from international contexts, including through a diverse teaching staff.

The MDR programme offers a challenging yet feasible pathway to degree completion. Feasibility is increased by strong guidance from the programme towards academic, career and personal development. The support policies and measures are robust and well-received by students. It speaks for the programme that students consider themselves to be part of a family.

MDR teaching staff is well-qualified, inspiring to students and fully equipped to guide students on their learning journey. The collaboration between the research groups within and outside of the programme strengthens the quality of the programme. The panel recommends the programme to look for ways to give teaching staff more time for academic reflection with colleagues and students.

Standard 3. Student assessment

The balance between individual and group work, the variety in assessment, the use of WU-wide assessment forms, the solid work of the Examining Board and regular calibration sessions create a coherent and robust assessment system that is reliable and transparent and fosters academic and professional student development. The panel recommends to ensure that a single report for the internship will suffice and to continue instructing assessors to follow the thesis assessment guidelines.

Standard 4. Achieved learning outcomes

The quality of theses indicate that students achieve the intended learning outcomes of the programme. Taking into account process and product development ensures a thorough assessment of student performance throughout the thesis trajectory. The positive experiences from alumni looking back on the programme are testimony to the impact of the programme on students and the learning outcomes students achieve.

Score table

The panel assesses the programme as follows:

Master's programme Development and Rural Innovation

Standard 1: Intended learning outcomes	meets the standard
Standard 2: Teaching-learning environment	meets the standard
Standard 3: Student assessment	meets the standard
Standard 4: Achieved learning outcomes	meets the standard
General conclusion	positive

Prof. dr. Jacqueline van Muijlwijk, panel chair

Dr. Rik Ligthart, panel secretary

Date: 8 April 2025

Introduction

Procedure

Assessment

On 18 December 2024, the master's programme Development and Rural Innovation of Wageningen University was assessed by an independent peer review panel as part of the cluster assessment WO Life Sciences and Natural Resources 3. The assessment cluster consisted of ten programmes, offered by the Wageningen University. The assessment followed the procedure and standards of the NVAO Assessment Framework for the Higher Education Accreditation System of the Netherlands (September 2024).

Quality assurance agency Academion coordinated the assessment upon request of Wageningen University. Jessica van Rossum acted as coordinator and panel secretary. Anne-Lise Kamphuis, Rik Ligthart and Sarah Boer also acted as panel secretaries in the cluster assessment. They have been certified and registered by the NVAO. Rik Ligthart acted as panel secretary for the site visit in which the master's programme Development and Rural Innovation was assessed.

Preparation

Academion composed the peer review panel in cooperation with the institution and taking into account the expertise and independence of the members, as well as consistency within the cluster. On 6 September 2024, the NVAO approved the composition of the panel. The coordinator instructed the panel chair on her role in the site visit according to the Panel chair profile (NVAO 2016).

The programme composed a site visit schedule in consultation with the coordinator (see Appendix 3). The programme selected representative partners for the various interviews. They also determined that the development dialogue would be made part of the site visit. A separate development report was made based on this dialogue.

The programme provided the secretary with a list of graduates of the academic years 2021-2022, 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. In consultation with the coordinator, the panel chair selected 15 theses of the master's programme Development and Rural Innovation, taking into account the diversity of final grades. Prior to the site visit, the programme provided the panel with the theses and the accompanying assessment forms. It also provided the panel with an information file (see Appendix 4).

The panel members studied the information and sent their findings to the panel secretary. He collected the panel's questions and remarks in a document and shared this with the panel members. In a preliminary meeting, the panel discussed the initial findings on the information file and the theses, as well as the division of tasks during the site visit. The panel was also informed on the assessment framework, the working method and the planning of the site visit and report.

Site visit

During the site visit, the panel interviewed various programme representatives (see Appendix 3). The panel also offered students and staff members an opportunity for confidential discussion during a consultation hour. No consultation was requested. The panel used the final part of the site visit to discuss its findings in an internal meeting. Afterwards, the panel chair publicly presented the preliminary findings.

Report

The panel secretary wrote a draft report based on the panel's findings and submitted it to the coordinator for peer assessment. Subsequently, the secretary sent the report to the panel for feedback. After processing this feedback, the secretary sent the draft report to Wageningen University in order to have it checked for factual irregularities. The secretary discussed the ensuing comments with the panel chair and changes were implemented accordingly. The panel then finalized the report, and the coordinator sent it to the Wageningen University.

Panel

The following panel members were involved in the cluster assessment:

- Prof. dr. J.E. (Jacqueline) van Muijlwijk-Koezen, professor in Innovations in Human Health and Life Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (chair);
- Ir. M.L. (Margot) Kok, Director of Education at the Faculty of Science at Utrecht University;
- Dr. A.A.J. (Annik) Van Keer, Deputy Director at the Department of Policy Education at the Faculty of Science at Utrecht University;
- Dr. Ir. L.G.J. (Luc) Boerboom, associate professor at the Faculty of Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation at the Universiteit Twente;
- Dr. G.M. (Garrett) Broad PhD, associate professor in Communication Studies at Rowan University (United States of America);
- Prof. V.B. (Vilis) Brukas, professor in Forest Planning at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (Sweden);
- Prof. dr. M. (Marleen) De Troch, associate professor in Marine Ecology at Ghent University (Belgium);
- Prof. dr. M.P. (Michael) Gilek, professor in Environmental Science at Södertörn University (Sweden);
- Prof. dr. Ing. B.J.J.M. (Bart) van der Hurk, Scientific Director at Deltares and professor in Climate Interactions with the Socio-Ecological System at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam;
- Prof. dr. P.L. (Pierre) Ibisch, professor in Socio-ecology of Forest Ecosystems at the Hochschule für nachhaltige Entwicklung Eberswalde (Germany);
- Dr. T.K. (Torsten) Krause, associate professor at the Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies of Lund University (Sweden);
- Em. prof. dr. B.A. (Bruce) Lankford, professor emeritus in Water and Irrigation Policy at the University of East Anglia (United Kingdom);
- Prof. dr. T. (Tatiana) Loboda, professor at the Department of Geographical Sciences of the University of Maryland (United States of America);
- Prof. dr. ing. S. (Steffen) Nijhuis, professor in Landscape-based Urbanism at the Delft University of Technology, Department of Urbanism, Section Landscape Architecture (referee panel member).
- Dr. M.A.F. (Mirjam) Ros-Tonen, researcher and former associate professor at the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of the University of Amsterdam;
- Prof. dr. S.T. (Sabine) Timpf, professor in Geoinformatics at the University of Augsburg (Germany);
- Prof. dr. V.B. (Veerle) Van Eetvelde, professor in Landscape research at Ghent University (Belgium);
- Prof. C.W. (Christian) Werthmann, professor in Landscape Architecture and Design at Leibniz University Hannover (Germany);
- J.A. (Job) Tuinder BSc , master's student Earth Sciences at the University of Amsterdam (student member);
- F. (Finn) van der Straaten BSc, master's student International Development Studies at the University of Amsterdam (student member).

The panel assessing the master's programme Development and Rural Innovation at Wageningen University consisted of the following members:

- Prof. dr. J.E. (Jacqueline) van Muijlwijk-Koezen, professor in Innovations in Human Health and Life Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (chair);
- Dr. A.A.J. (Annik) Van Keer, policy officer for Education at Utrecht University;
- Dr. G.M. (Garrett) Broad PhD, associate professor in Communication Studies at Rowan University (United States of America);
- Dr. M.A.F. (Mirjam) Ros-Tonen, researcher and former associate professor at the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of the University of Amsterdam;
- F. (Finn) van der Straaten BSc, master's student International Development Studies at the University of Amsterdam (student member).

Panel member Mirjam Ros-Tonen attended the preliminary panel meeting, but was unable to attend the site visit due to illness. After consultation with the other panel members and the programme, it was agreed to use her input for the questions during the site visit, and to include her feedback on the draft report.

Information on the programmes

Name of the institution:	Wageningen University
Status of the institution:	Publicly funded institution
Result institutional quality assurance assessment:	Positive
Programme name:	M Development and Rural Innovation
CROHO number:	60103
Level:	Master
Orientation:	Academic
Number of credits:	120 EC
Specializations or tracks:	None
Location:	Wageningen
Mode of study:	Fulltime
Language of instruction:	English
Submission date NVAO:	1 May 2025

Description of the assessment

Organization

Wageningen University comprises of one faculty with five science groups, also known as departments. These science groups are Agrotechnology and Food Sciences, Animal Sciences, Environmental Sciences, Plant Sciences and Social Sciences. The science groups deliver education through chair groups. The science groups are responsible for the management of the activities of the chair groups and the research institutes of Wageningen Research (WR). Chair groups are usually clustered according to similarities under the broad field of a particular science group. A chair group is the organizational component within Wageningen University to give shape to academic teaching and research and create societal value in a specific field. There are about ninety chair groups, each of them led by a professor to conduct research in the specific domain. Despite the exclusiveness of every chair group, they all work under the thematic area of healthy food and living environment. A chair group can be involved in the education of more than one programme. The involvement of chair groups in a programme is evident in the courses and the specialization. Regarding a programme, the Board of Education oversees that the programme director and the programme committee (consisting of students and teachers) develop and update bachelor's and master's curricula and align with the chair group(s) on whether new courses and specializations are needed or existing courses or thesis specializations have to be enhanced.

Recommendations previous accreditation panel

The previous accreditation of the master's programme Development and Rural Innovation of Wageningen University took place in 2019. In the self-evaluation report of the current assessment, the programme described the actions taken in response to the recommendations. In addition, several improvements were discussed during the site visit. The panel concludes that programme management has taken the recommendations seriously. The panel is satisfied with the improvement measures taken. Among other things, the programme has broadened its profile to include, for example, urban challenges and rural sociology, and has improved thesis guidance and assessment procedures to promote timely completion and more transparent assessment, including regular thesis reviews by the Examination Board. The panel applauds the programme for taking up the recommendations and suggestions from the previous accreditation, leading to an improvement of the overall programme quality. And while some of the changes are not yet in effect, the panel is confident that the upcoming changes will further improve the student journey.

For some suggestions, the programme, after careful consideration, has decided to follow a different path than suggested by the panel, such as not limiting the number of electives outside the social sciences and requiring interdisciplinarity in every thesis. In these cases, the panel understands the programme's reasoning and believes that these decisions were well-reasoned. Some examples of changes in response to the previous accreditation are discussed under the relevant standards.

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.

Findings

Programme profile

The two-year master's programme Development and Rural Innovation (MDR) is designed for students with a technical or life sciences background interested in global development issues and innovation in agriculture, food and natural resource management. The programme aims to develop 'hybrid professionals', academically trained graduates able to link different scientific and societal stakeholders in dynamic, multicultural and transdisciplinary contexts across the globe, from local rural and intersecting urban levels to the international policy arena. The MDR programme provides students insight into knowledge production and innovation processes as well as critical perspectives on innovation and development in socio-political contexts. It originates in development studies, science and technology studies and communication sciences.

The programme bridges students from technical and natural science backgrounds with critical social science theories, particularly in the context of socio-technical change. Its interdisciplinary design enables students to approach complex problems from multiple angles, preparing them to communicate effectively across sectors, disciplines, and stakeholders with diverse forms of knowledge and experience. The programme emphasizes decoloniality and critical thinking as key aspects of its vision and aims to cross boundaries between disciplines and cultures. Through these aspects students learn to embrace discomfort and to critically reflect on Eurocentric language and theories, applying a moral principle of care. Based on the recommendations of the previous accreditation panel, the programme has evolved in recent years, adding global and urban perspectives to its initial focus on developmental issues in the rural South, ensuring that challenges are approached from multiple angles.

From the documentation and conversations during the site visit, the panel concludes that the MDR programme is well-conceptualized, bringing together critical perspectives with the practice of innovation and development. The panel is happy to see that the programme has managed to evolve, from focusing on the rural South to a broader global perspective, including urban development. The panel appreciates this change and considers the programme to be a unique and relevant multidisciplinary programme. The emphasis on decoloniality is a strong and forward-thinking aspect of the programme vision and gives MDR a distinct identity.

Learning outcomes

The programme has translated its aims into a set of eleven intended learning outcomes (see Appendix 1). The learning outcomes incorporate critical analysis, applied research, and professional skill development. The panel notes that working with AI and other emerging digital technologies is not explicitly mentioned in the programme's learning outcomes. The programme does pay attention to the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models. Students are informed about the possibilities of these new techniques and the do's and don'ts of their application. The programme acknowledges that AI can be a useful research instrument as it helps in developing critical analysis skills, among others.

The panel finds that the programme's learning outcomes align well with the relevant Dublin Descriptors and are formulated as such that they reflect the required master's level. It is recommended that the programme

investigates whether AI skills could be a worthwhile addition to the programme's intended learning outcomes.

Research and connections to the professional field
In its academic orientation the programme is supported by four science groups: Sociology & Development of Change (SDC), Knowledge Technology & Innovation (KTI), Strategic Communication (COM) and Rural Sociology (RSO). The science groups offer analytical lenses and learning paths for understanding societal development challenges. The research groups are drawn primarily from the social sciences department.

The professional field is connected through external commissioners, guest lecturers, and the External Advisory Committee. The programme works with around ten external commissioners who provide students with research assignments. The involvement of commissioners and guest lectures help students connecting theory to practice. The External Advisory Committee (EAC) comes together on a regular basis to discuss developments in the professional field and their impact on the MDR programme. Discussions with the committee help the programme to gain more insight in the professional domain and to get in contact with relevant professionals. The EAC is positive about the interaction with MDR and the overall quality of the programme.

The panel finds that the programme successfully combines its academic orientation with professional application. The research component in all four science groups and the connections to the professional field are strong. The research groups provide students with a clear structure and personalized learning paths. Where research groups are drawn primarily from the social sciences department, there is an opportunity to strengthen connections with engineering research groups to further enhance interdisciplinarity. The panel considers the connections to the professional field – through commissioners, guest lecturers, and the External Advisory Committee – to be beneficial for the quality of the programme.

Considerations
The panel commends the programme for bridging sectors, disciplines, and diverse knowledge systems, thereby addressing an important societal need for professionals capable of working across boundaries. The programme offers students from natural and life sciences a great opportunity to transition into a social science context, equipping them with critical and applied skills that make them hybrid professionals highly relevant to today's dynamic professional landscape. The programme strikes a fine balance between its academic orientation and practical application.

The learning outcomes accurately reflect the orientation and level of the programme. Moving forward, the programme could consider incorporating skills related to Artificial Intelligence in its learning outcomes to ensure that the programme remains relevant and up-to-date.

Conclusion
The panel concludes that the master's programme Development and Rural Innovation meets standard 1.

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.

Findings

Curriculum

The curriculum spans two years (see Appendix 2). Starting with theory, case studies, and guest lectures, students later go into the field and work on real-life assignments from commissioners. The programme encourages a range of professional paths, with students given opportunities to follow specific learning paths in their areas of interest. A personal motivation compass and career booklet help students making choices during their study career, to position themselves, and to explore future career opportunities. The continuous 'Thesis and Professional Path' runs throughout the programme and guides students on their journey to discover their norms and values, positioning, and growth direction.

The first year of the curriculum consists of six periods and offers students domain-related introductory courses and thesis preparatory courses (18 credit points/EC), research methodology courses (12 EC), electives (12 EC), Academic Master Cluster courses (12 EC), and professional path guidance (6 EC). In the Academic Master Cluster courses, students develop professional skills for societal research and facilitation of knowledge sharing for innovation. In addition to the already existing course on quantitative research design and methods, the programme has developed a course on qualitative research methods, following up on a recommendation from the previous panel. The qualitative research course aims to address previous gaps in methodological training and further enhance students' research skills. In the second year students write their thesis and follow an internship. Students can choose the sequence of the thesis and internship. Students speak highly of the internship as it helps them in connecting theory and practice and in further developing personal and professional skills.

Courses employ a variety of interactive methods to stimulate learning, including group work, preparatory assignments, debates, personal case discussions, peer review sessions, essay writing, and presentations. To broaden the perspective of students, they share classes with students from other masters on some occasions. In the courses there is increasing attention for more empowering as well as positive examples of development and innovation, and for theories and perspectives other than the dominant Western ones. The recently implemented course African Philosophy was met with a lot of enthusiasm by staff and students. Staff note, and the panel agrees, that the course helps in making students intrigued, critical, and action-ready. The programme also includes an optional field trip to Mallorca. The panel learnt from the students' SWOT analysis that the Mallorca-course is considered to be contradictory in terms of sustainability in comparison to the added value of the course. The lecturers are aware of the negative student appreciation and are thinking about a revision of this specific component.

Based on the documentation and discussions during the site visit, the panel determines that the curriculum is carefully structured and sequenced to guide students through a comprehensive learning journey. The curriculum ties in with the intended learning outcomes and profile of the programme. It provides a well-rounded exploration of central debates and theoretical approaches in development, innovation, and socio-technical change, providing a strong theoretical foundation while offering opportunities to apply theory in practice through research methodology and development-focused activities. Greater integration of critically-oriented, non-Western concepts into the broader coursework could be encouraged.

The panel finds that the interdisciplinary programme effectively integrates academic demands and critical thinking with practical skill development. The career booklet's emphasis on real-world applicability and the personal motivation compass enhance students' career readiness and provide clear guidance for post-graduation pathways. The programme should continue to build out support and opportunities that align with the future employment prospects of graduates, particularly those continuing their careers outside of academia. Furthermore, the curriculum's scope offers sufficient breadth and flexibility, particularly through its four distinct tracks. Students can choose from tailored learning paths and elective offerings, allowing them to pursue specific areas of interest and encouraging a variety of professional trajectories.

Admission and language

To enter the programme, students must have a WU BSc degree in Forest and Nature Conservation, Environmental Sciences, Food Technology, Biosystems Engineering, Animal Sciences, Biotechnology, International Land and Water Management, Landscape Architecture and Spatial Planning, Molecular Life Sciences, Plant Sciences, Nutrition and Health, Soil, Water, Atmosphere, a BSc in Biology from a Dutch university, or an equivalent of these programmes. The programme has a steady yearly influx between 20 to 30 students. Incoming students are all from technical and life sciences. The programme welcomes students with diverse backgrounds worldwide, including countries like Nigeria, Mexico, and Colombia. Approximately half of the students is international. Recently there has been a notable decline in incoming international students, particularly from outside the EU, mainly due to the cancellation of funding programmes.

The programme is taught in English as students are trained to work in an international context where mastering the English language is important. The theme of the programme is embedded in an international context. Many students therefore do their research abroad so that theory is put into practice in the given context. Applying the English language is also a condition for facilitating an international classroom, one of the basic principles of education at Wageningen University where English has been the language of instruction for all master's programmes since the introduction of the bachelor's and master's system.

The panel considers the admission requirements to be realistic in relation to the intended learning outcomes, and believes the use of English as language of instruction as well as for the programme name matches with the international profile and orientation of the programme. Also, many graduates find employment in an international (academic or professional) setting in which mastery of the English language is important. The programme recommends to explore options to keep attracting students from around the world in order to maintain a culturally diverse student population and to solidify its international character, including through continued diversification of course offerings and teaching staff.

Feasibility and guidance

Supervisors and senior students are available for questions and provide support to students, including guidance on specific skills, such as developing fluent writing skills. Specific courses, such as Introduction to the Sociology of Development, prioritize student well-being. Furthermore, the programme has study advisors available for the students, who regularly communicate important information, offer individual guidance on academic choices, provide support, or refer students to specialized resources when needed. Students with a functional impairment can appeal to the student deans, psychologists and study advisors for guidance. In addition, a student doctor is available for select cases. If necessary, this support staff can suggest individual measures to support students with a functional impairment, such as additional exam time for students with dyslexia. Policies for this are available at the central university level.

Students appreciate the guidance and support from the programme and consider themselves to be part of a family, adding to a feeling of well-being. They feel well informed on the ways in which they can find guidance. The study advisor is highly regarded by students in playing a critical role in providing support for academic, career, and personal development. Students feel the programme challenges them in a beneficial and constructive way. The start of the programme can feel a bit overwhelming, but going through the process helps students shifting their mindset. Students may struggle at first, but power through it, supported by the programme, and come out better. Examples of positive case studies play an important role in helping students appreciate what is going well in society, especially as they develop a critical perspective on the development and innovation processes. Lecturers see that students are highly involved and that a lot of discussion among students continues outside of the classroom.

Also, students welcome working on real-life cases, the socio-technical approach, the diversity of topics and perspectives, the tailored programme, the small-scale and diverse student population, the engaging and applied learning methods, and the openness of the programme to student feedback.

The panel finds that less than 50% of the students complete the programme within two years, with an average completion time of 2.5 to 3 years. The panel understands from the conversations that the delay is more a consequence of students wanting to do more (and obtaining more credits) out of personal interests than of structural hurdles in the programme. The programme took actions to support the feasibility of the programme. For instance, the number of introductory courses at the start of the programme was brought back from three to two, responding to students' concerns about workload. Furthermore, the guidance of students in the thesis trajectory was intensified to help them make the right choices in time.

From the documentation and discussions during the site visit, the panel concludes that the programme excels at student support and has suitable and well-documented policies and measures for students with impairments. The support and guidance policies are robust and well-received by students, and the information provision is well organized. While the panel concludes that the programme is feasible and that students achieving more than 120 credits is praiseworthy, it would be advisable to clearly communicate to students that going beyond the norm (of 120 credits) is not expected. Not every student is in the position to take on extra courses (for financial, motivational, or any other reasons), and a perceived bar higher than 120 credits could foster a feeling of inequality. The panel would like to remark in this context that learning is a lifelong journey which does not end after the master's programme. Additionally, the panel suggests to continue informing students well about the challenging first period and bigger picture of the programme.

Teaching staff

The programme has 53 lecturers, including ten professors. The majority of the teaching staff hold a doctoral degree. Around 53% of the teaching staff have a university teaching qualification (UTQ) and taking into account the lecturers that are currently in the process of obtaining a UTQ, the percentage adds up to 80%. One lecturer holds a senior university teaching qualification. Teaching staff has been diversified in recent years in terms of background and age to ensure a diversity of viewpoints. They are actively engaged in research and are highly regarded by the students.

The chair groups of the programme work together, which can be exemplified by the merging of the three introduction courses, hosted by different research groups, into two courses. Teaching staff indicate that there is a lot of informal collaboration with teachers from other disciplines and chair groups. At the same time, they would welcome more time for academic reflection, deep intellectual debate with colleagues and for talking to students outside of the classroom. Students underline the importance of increased teaching staff collaboration and debate as they sometimes recognize opposing views within the WU chair groups.

The panel establishes that the programme benefits from an interdisciplinary teaching staff of high quality, whose overlapping but distinct teaching interests ensure a dynamic and multifaceted curriculum. Teaching staff have a sufficient command of the English language. The research activities align with the programme's vision and mission and bring inspiration to the classroom. The research groups work together constructively. The merging of three introduction courses into two is a nice example of multiple research groups joining forces and looking beyond their own expertise.

The panel recommends allowing staff more time for interactions with colleagues and students to strengthen the intellectual culture, especially given the interdisciplinary nature of the programme. More time will help staff in maintaining and expanding their expertise, in improving the intellectual culture of the programme, and in developing a strong community. Ultimately it may be expected that students will reach higher levels. It would be good to bring diverse perspectives together already in an early stage, for example by teaching common courses to all students in which they can share opinions, and by supplying all students with basic knowledge on having dialogue on opposing views and facilitating these dialogues. Creating this space may need broader support from WU but is also something that can be advanced at the level of the programme. The programme could consider finding ways to leverage existing, WU-wide events for MDR community-building activities, to have intervision, and to discuss course content, teaching methods, and (AI) developments. The team teacher days that took place before Covid could serve as a blueprint for future initiatives.

Considerations

The panel finds that the programme's deliberate curriculum structure demonstrates clear strengths in its interdisciplinary and critical approach. The programme combines academic demands with practical application, preparing students for future professional success. The flexible nature of the programme ensures that graduates are equipped for wide-ranging career opportunities in fields that demand interdisciplinary expertise. The admission requirements and use of the English language match with the profile and the orientation of the programme. The panel recommends continuing to attract international students in order to maintain a culturally diverse student population. In addition, as the professional landscape and job-seeking needs of students continue to evolve, it remains imperative that the programme continually assesses the extent to which they offer students optimal opportunities for putting their academic work into practice, network with professionals in the field, and learn from positive examples of alumni and programme partners.

The MDR programme offers a challenging yet feasible pathway to degree completion. Feasibility is increased by strong guidance from the programme towards academic, career and personal development. The support policies and measures are robust and well-received by students, and information provision is well organized. It speaks for the programme that students consider themselves to be part of a family. The panel recommends to clearly communicate to students that going beyond the norm of 120 credits is optional but not expected.

MDR teaching staff is well-qualified, inspiring to students, and fully equipped to guide students on their learning journey. The collaboration between the research groups within and outside of the programme strengthens the quality of the programme. Further utilizing these collaborations, the panel recommends the programme to look for ways to give teaching staff more time for academic reflection with colleagues and students. The panel recommends initiating a UTQ trajectory for the 20% who have not yet obtained a UTQ qualification or are not yet in the process of obtaining it.

Conclusion

The panel concludes that the master's programme Development and Rural Innovation meets standard 2.

Standard 3. Student assessment

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

Findings

System of assessment

Taking the WU-wide assessment policy as starting point, the MDR programme has drawn an assessment strategy which shows how the learning outcomes are assessed. This includes assessment matrices that show the relation between course assessment and the programme's intended learning outcomes. The assessment system combines individual and group assessment. A diverse range of assessment methods are used, including written products such as papers, reviews, and proposals, and assignments like software designs and films. There are mock exams and clear standards for thesis assessment and individual course assessments, which are communicated to students prior to the tests and assignments. Students indicate that the programme involves a significant amount of writing but that progression is well-structured, beginning with smaller essays that gradually built up to the thesis.

The chair groups discuss the role of Artificial Intelligence and students have begun utilizing AI tools. Students are permitted to use them, as long as they are transparent about how and why these tools are used. For instance, in the course 'Political Ecology' students ask questions to AI, after which the students analyze the output and the technology behind it. In addition, university-wide information sessions have been initiated. There are various information sites, both for teachers and students.

Students are also guided in preventing plagiarism. They can use plagiarism tools when handing in reports for courses and research projects. If there are any doubts about the originality of texts, there is always first a conversation with the lecturer. Although these plagiarism principles are known to the students, the panel sees that only a limited number of course manuals explicitly refer to these principles and related fraud policy.

The panel concludes that the assessment system is robust and coherent and effectively supports students' academic and professional development. There is a good balance between individual and group work and the variety in assessment supports the programme's commitment to assessing learning outcomes comprehensively. The panel likes the use of innovative assessments like software designs and films and encourages MDR to continue on this path in order to cater for varying students' learning styles.

The panel underlines the importance of considering generative AI in relation to the programme's focus on writing and written assessments. It would be highly beneficial for the programme to reevaluate whether this emphasis should be maintained or adjusted for better alignment with current trends and technologies. In addition, the panel suggests to include a paragraph on plagiarism principles and fraud policy in each course manual.

Internship and thesis assessment

The programme applies detailed WU-wide assessment forms for the thesis and internship. The assessment of the thesis and internship focuses on both outcome and process: 50% of the grade is determined by the quality of the research report, 40% by the performance of students (for instance, on independence and time management), and 10% by the oral presentation and defence. The programme provides feedback continuously throughout the thesis process, rather than being concentrated at its conclusion. Student reports include reflections on their process and learning curve, allowing assessors to also assess students' ability to critically reflect. Assessment is done collaboratively by two examiners. The programme organizes internal calibration sessions where assessors discuss theses, grading and feedback. The panel finds that for the internship, students sometimes need to write two reports: one academically-oriented for the university, and one practically-oriented for the host organization (where the latter is not part of the formal assessment).

Students feel the rubrics and accompanying explanations for assessment are clear and that the grading process is fair and transparent. Students can discuss the application of the rubrics with their WU supervisors, who demonstrate flexibility in the application. Some students really want to dive into theory, while other students are more application-oriented. The programme addresses these different demands, focusing on the development of individual students. The open discussion and flexibility is appreciated by the students. While having a uniform grading scheme offers clear advantages, the programme signals it also presents limitations in practice. For instance, transdisciplinarity could be better reflected in the rubrics in order to adequately evaluate work that spans multiple disciplines.

The panel finds that in general the feedback in the assessment form for the theses that it studied (see Standard 4) provides a transparent and detailed understanding of the strengths and areas of improvement for the student and the product. The ongoing engagement between students and staff supports student learning and development and is exemplary for the programme's effective thesis guidance. Taking into account process and product development ensures a thorough assessment of student performance throughout the thesis trajectory. The panel sees in some occasions that the thesis assessment form includes feedback from only one assessor and that sometimes the provided feedback is not completely in line with the grades given, where the feedback is more positive than the actual grading. Therefore the panel recommends to continue instructing assessors to follow the thesis assessment guidelines. In giving feedback it would be helpful to use the same wording as those of the rubrics.

The panel concludes that the internship and thesis assessment is reliable, consistent, and transparent for students due to the use of WU-wide assessment forms and calibration sessions. The requirement of an oral presentation and defence alongside the written report enhances the rigour of the assessment process. The panel notices that a tension can occur between the programme's academic focus and the primarily professional aspirations of students and organizations. Specifically during the internship, the programme emphasizes that students need to produce an academic report which can have a lower utility for the organization involved. For this reason, organizations sometimes ask students to write an additional practically-oriented report. To promote feasibility, the panel suggests that the programme tries to ensure that wherever possible, a single academic report can be produced for the internship, to which a chapter could be added focusing solely on the practical application/context.

The panel recommends keeping an open discussion on the use of WU-wide assessment forms and to explore ways to balance uniform use with practical application of the forms. In the discussion, the programme could also explore the possibility of integrating elements of AI application into the rubrics, responding proactively to the evolving role of AI in higher education.

Examining board
WU has four Examining Boards. Each of the boards is responsible for the examination arrangements for one of the four domains of study programmes: Life Sciences, Social Sciences, Environment & Landscape, and Technology & Nutrition. The Examining Board for MDR is the Examining Board Social Sciences and has one external member. Members, who are also involved in teaching in the MDR programme, check the theses and their assessment on validity, reliability and transparency. They also check whether the programme assessment covers the intended learning outcomes. The Examining Board has regular discussions with the programme committee and the programme director. Once every four years they review chair groups as part of a comprehensive evaluation process, responding to the recommendation of the previous accreditation committee to introduce this. In addition, assessment experts from WU offer workshops to chair groups to further increase the quality of assessments. The Examining Board feel they are well-supported by the university in terms of time and resources.

From the conversations during the site visit, the panel concludes that the Examining Board is aware of its duties and responsibilities and carries them out with rigor. The collaboration between the programme and the Examining Board is reported by both to be open, continuous, and constructive. The solid work of the Examining Board and their constructive collaboration with the programme further support the adequateness of the assessment system.

Considerations
The balance between individual and group work, the variety in assessment, the use of WU-wide assessment forms, the solid work of the Examining Board and regular calibration sessions create a coherent and robust assessment system that is reliable and transparent and which fosters academic and professional student development. The panel recommends to ensure that a single report for the internship will suffice and to continue instructing assessors to follow the thesis assessment guidelines.

Conclusion
The panel concludes that the master's programme Development and Rural Innovation meets standard 3.

Standard 4. Achieved learning outcomes

The programme demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.

Findings

Thesis quality
The panel reviewed fifteen theses to assess whether the students realize the achieved learning outcomes. Based on this review, the panel finds that theses reflect the programme's academic accuracy and strong conceptual grounding, showcasing students' analytical and research capabilities. Key strengths of the theses include the integration of theory and societal relevance, positionality and reflexivity, diverse topics and approaches, and clear writing and report structures. The balance in the theses between theoretical research and practical relevance aligns well with the programme's orientation. The panel finds it positive that students are encouraged to reflect on their positionality, contributing to a deeper awareness of their role in the research process. The programme's focus on decoloniality is visible only to a limited extent in the reviewed theses. Given that the programme emphasizes decoloniality as one of the key aspects of its vision, students could be encouraged more to include a discussion on decoloniality in the thesis.

The panel also examined a number of internship reports as this is for most students the final activity in the programme. The main finding is that the internship reports include a mix of practical insights from the internship experience, reflections on the internship process, and investigations of the theoretical implications of the work for the broader themes examined in the programme. As such, the quality of the internship reports is in line with the thesis quality.

The panel concludes that students of the MDR programme consistently produce high-quality theses that meet or exceed the standards of comparable social science programmes. The panel finds the overall quality of the assessment of theses commendable.

Alumni

Alumni indicate that the programme prepares them well for the job market and label the field research, thesis, and internship as strong elements of the programme particularly helpful in that respect. Around 20% of the graduates start working for non-governmental organizations, and also around 20% commence in corporate business. Around 25% of the graduates continue as a PhD/researcher/lecturer, while others start working for governmental organizations or as entrepreneur. Looking back on the programme, alumni appreciate the conceptual depth, the critical attitude, working in interdisciplinary teams, the practical orientation, the support structures, and the possibility to combine the physical domain with people and politics. Also, alumni value the theoretical background which helps diving deeper into complex societal problems. They see why things in practice are working or not and can come up with ideas for improvements. Furthermore, the programme makes them aware of their "bubble" – wherein certain norms and approaches are often accepted at face value – and offers a possibility to break out of that bubble and analyze practices from multiple angles. Teaching staff adds to this that most students experience a steep learning curve and that the programme can be life-changing as students explore and discover new realities.

Currently, the traditional academic thesis is commonplace. Given that approximately 75% of graduates do not pursue a PhD and are likely to enter professional sectors, the panel thinks there is room to reconsider whether the traditional academic thesis is the most suitable final output for all students. There are opportunities to explore creative forms of thesis production while maintaining a high standard of academic rigour.

Based on the documentation and conversations during the site visit, the panel concludes that MDR alumni look back positively on their learning experience in the programme. Alumni are widely employable in fields requiring innovative, multidisciplinary approaches to complex development challenges, and the MDR programme prepares them well for a variety of roles. Graduates' employability across multiple sectors demonstrates the programme's broad professional relevance.

Considerations

The quality of theses indicate that students realize the intended learning outcomes of the programme. The positive experiences from alumni looking back on the programme are testimony to the impact of the programme on students and the learning outcomes students achieve.

Conclusion

The panel concludes that the master's programme Development and Rural Innovation meets standard 4.

General conclusion

The panel has established that the master's programme Development and Rural Innovation meets all four NVAO standards.

The panel's assessment of the master's programme Development and Rural Innovation is positive.

Development points

The panel is very satisfied with the programme. In moving forward, the programme could benefit from the following panel recommendations:

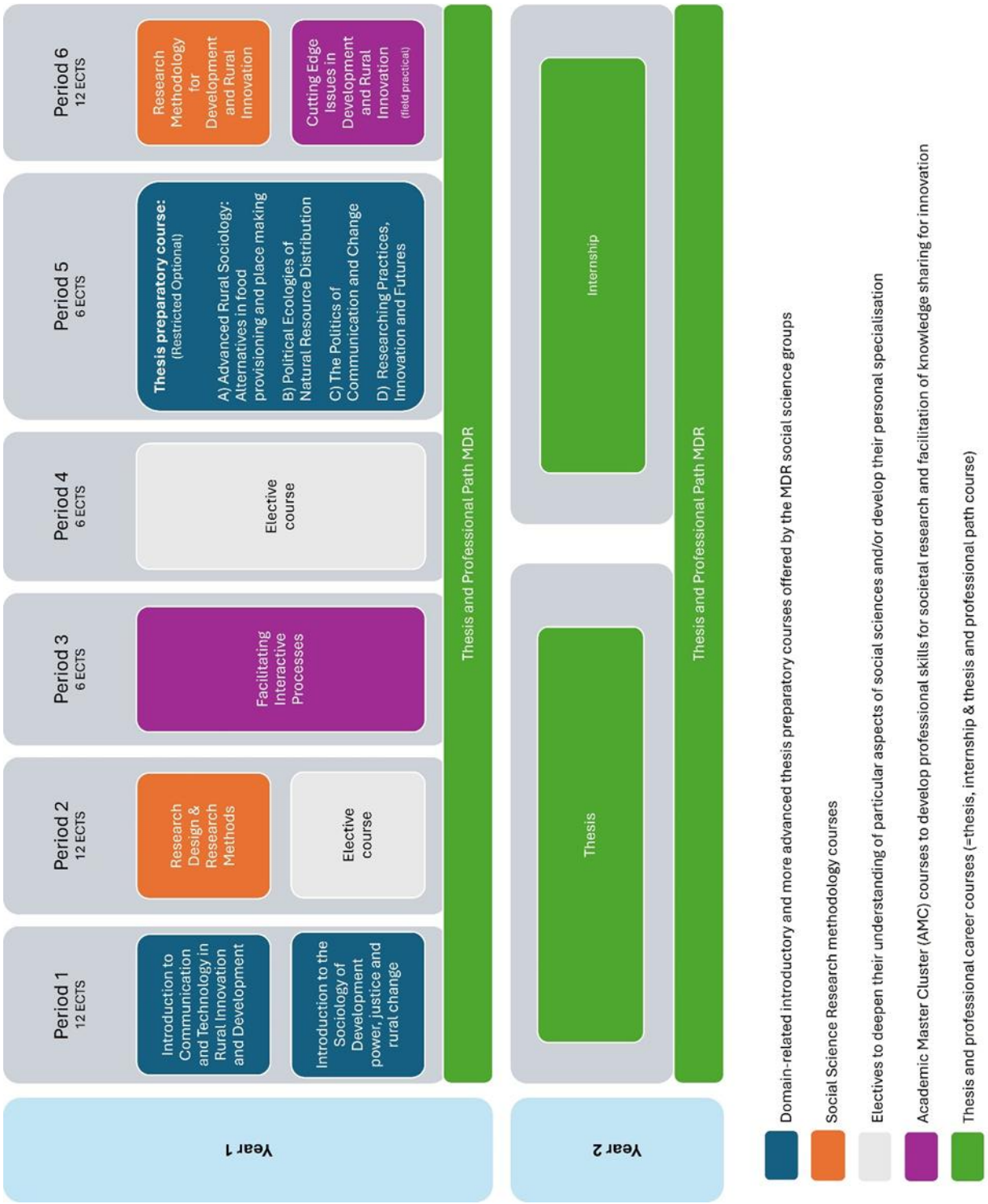
1. Consider incorporating skills related to Artificial Intelligence and other emerging digital technologies in the programme learning outcomes to ensure that the programme remains relevant and up-to-date, and rethink the balance in ways of assessment throughout the programme.
2. Continue to attract international students to maintain or expand a culturally diverse student population, since this clearly adds up to the international aspect of the programme.
3. Explore ways to allow staff more time for interactions with colleagues and students.
4. Try to ensure that wherever possible, a single report can be produced for the internship rather than an academic and professionally-oriented report.
5. Continue instructing assessors to follow the thesis assessment guidelines and ensure that the written feedback on theses is in line with the rubrics wording.

Appendix 1. Intended learning outcomes

Intended programme learning outcomes and Dublin descriptors 2024

After successful completion of this MSc programme graduates are expected to be able to:		Dublin descriptors*
1	Explain ideas, concepts and theories of development sociology, rural sociology, communication, innovation studies, and technology studies in relation to current issues, problems and challenges in the domain of development and rural innovation.	*Knowledge and understanding*
2	Assess and apply theoretical and methodological perspectives from a) development sociology, b) rural sociology, c) communication, innovation studies, or d) technology studies to analyse current issues, problems and challenges in the domain of development and rural innovation.	*Applying knowledge and understanding* *Making judgements*
3	Design and assess research in the domain of development and rural innovation, including formulating a problem statement and operationalising objectives and research questions within an adequate research plan.	*Applying knowledge and understanding* *Making judgements*
4	Select and apply appropriate research methods and techniques to collect and analyse data from literature and empirical research in the domain of development and rural innovation.	*Applying knowledge and understanding*
5	Critically reflect upon the ontological and epistemic dimension of the design, implementation, facilitation and evaluation of (integrative) tools and methodologies for interventions and programmes in the domain of development and rural innovation.	*Applying knowledge and understanding* *Making judgements*
6	Interpret debates around social and natural science interdisciplinarity and communicate with diverse scientific audiences about different perspectives on problems and challenges in the domain of development and rural innovation.	*Knowledge and understanding* *Communication*
7	Facilitate communication and decision-making in networks of actors with different knowledges and cultural backgrounds with the aim of enhancing development and rural innovation.	*Applying knowledge and understanding* *Communication*
8	Translate research results into recommendations for intervention and policy in the domain of development and rural innovation.	*Applying knowledge and understanding*
9	Critically reflect upon different perspectives and roles of the professional in development and rural innovation, including their position, ethical and value-driven aspects, in diverse international contexts.	*Making judgements*
10	Communicate convincingly (verbally and in writing) about (own) research findings and project results and their underpinning rationale.	*Communication*
11	Design and plan own learning processes based on continuous reflection (both individually and in discussion with others) upon personal knowledge, skills, attitudes and functioning.	*Learning skills*

Appendix 2. Programme curriculum



Appendix 3. Programme of the site visit

Wednesday 18 December 2024

08.30	08.45	Welcome	
08.45	09.15	Internal panel session	
09.15	10.00	Interview programme management	Programme director Chair Programme Committee (PC), lecturer chairgroup KTI DB student PC, 2021/2022 student MDR Dean of Education BoE-member
10.00	10.30	Internal panel session	
10.30	11.15	Interview students & alumni	2nd year student, PC student member 2nd year student 2nd year student Alumnus, currently following 2nd master Alumnus, currently own company Alumna, currently working for NGO and doing PhD at WUR
11.30	12.15	Interview teaching staff	Teacher KTI Teacher KTI Teacher KTI Teacher SDC + chairholder Teacher SDC Teacher RSO Teacher RSO Teacher COM + chairholder
12.15	13.15	Lunch	
13.15	14.00	Interview Board of Examiners & study advisors	Chair of the Examining Board Social Sciences (EBSS) Secretary EBSS 2nd secretary EBSS Study advisor
14.00	15.00	Thematic session	Students and staff
15.00	15.45	Internal panel session	
15.45	16.30	Concluding session programme management	Same group as interview programme management
16.30	17.15	Concluding panel session	
17.15	17.45	Oral report panel	

Appendix 4. Materials

Prior to the site visit, the panel studied 15 theses of the master's programme Development and Rural Innovation. Information on the theses is available from Academion upon request.

The panel also studied other materials, which included:

- Cover letter MDR panel visit 2024
- Administrative data of the programme MDR
- Governance structure and organization of WU degree programmes 2024
- WU Vision for Education 2017
- EER WU 2024-2025
- Assessment Policy WU 2023
- Academic Calendar WUR 2024-2025
- Framework for Education Wageningen University 2024-2025
- Study Advice Service level commitment 2023
- Course 1 CPT28806
- Course 2 SDC23806
- Course 3 CPT60306
- Course 4 SDC30806
- MSc Thesis Course Guide WU 2023-2024
- Thesis and assessment forms selected students MDR
- Brochure MSc MDR 2024-2025
- MDR Programme planning 2024-2025
- MDR admission criteria
- MDR Profile and Learning outcomes 2023
- Language of MDR: English
- Education Monitor MDR
- NSE2024 MDR Factsheet
- Student chapter: SWOT MDR 2023
- Student chapter: SWOT MDR 2024
- Provisions for students with impairments
- Minutes of the External Advisory Board MDR (Date 25.06.2024)
- MDR assessment matrix 2024-2025
- Career booklet MDR
- List of Teaching staff MDR 2024-2025
- PC annual report 2020-2021 and plan 2021-2022 MDR
- PC annual report 2021-2022 and plan 2022-2023 MDR
- PC annual report 2022-2023 and plan 2023-2024 MDR
- Annual report Examining Boards 2020-2021
- Annual report Examining Boards 2021-2022
- Annual report Examining Boards 2022-2023
- EBSS report quality control session MDR theses February 2024
- Internship course guide
- Internship reports and assessment forms