

Reassessment report  
Limited Framework Programme Assessment  
**Research Master Communication Science**  
University of Amsterdam

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## 1. Executive summary

In this executive summary, the assessment panel presents the main findings and considerations underlying the reassessment of the Research Master Communication Science programme of University of Amsterdam. In this reassessment process, the panel specifically verified whether the programme fulfilled the two conditions set by NVAO. The basis of this reassessment rests on the decision by NVAO of 15 February 2022, following the report of the assessment panel of 25 May 2021, with the two conditions to be fulfilled stated as follows.

- (1) Improve the constructive alignment between the learning goals of the substantive coursework (30 EC) and the intended learning outcomes of the programme. To do so, be more critical and restrictive with elective courses.
- (2) Take further actions to differentiate the one-year master and research master programme, and set additional requirements if students take a one-year master course as an elective.

Research Master Communication Science programme management has put in substantial effort to improve the programme and to fulfil the two conditions set. The improvements, undertaken in consecutive steps, were to lower the number of shared elective one-year master courses in the curriculum and to set extra requirements for research master students, when taking one-year master courses, in order to align the substantive coursework with the programme intended learning outcomes and to differentiate the one-year and research master programmes more clearly.

In the curriculum, tailor-made research master courses have been designed and realised as part of the substantive coursework to replace the shared elective one-year master courses. Over the academic years the number of these research master courses goes from one to three (2021/2022 to 2023/2024) and subsequently to four (in 2024/2025), substantially raising the proportion of these courses within the substantive coursework. In addition, research master students taking one-year master courses are required to complete extra in-depth assignments. These assignments bring the requirements for research master students in one-year master courses to research master level. The combination of tailor-made research master courses and extra assignments make the substantive coursework comply with the programme intended learning outcomes and elevate this coursework to research master level.

Having reassessed the Research Master Communication Science programme of University of Amsterdam, the assessment panel finds the programme to have fulfilled the conditions set by NVAO, and judges the programme to be positive in terms of the NVAO Assessment framework. Therefore, the panel advises NVAO to prolong the accreditation of this programme.

Rotterdam, 17 January 2024,

Prof. M. Kleemans PhD  
(panel chair)

W. Vercouteren  
(panel secretary)

## 2. Programme administrative information

Name programme in CROHO: Research Master Communication Science  
Orientation, level programme: Academic Master  
Grade: Master of Science (MSc)  
Number of credits: 120 EC  
Specialisations: Academic Track  
Professional Track  
Location: Amsterdam  
Mode of study: Full-time (language of instruction: English)  
Registration in CROHO: 21PK-60163

Name of institution: University of Amsterdam  
Status of institution: Government-funded University  
Institution's quality assurance: Approved

### 3. Findings, considerations and assessments

#### 3.0 Improvement process

##### *Findings*

On 17 March 2021, the previous assessment panel visited the Research Master Communication Science programme of University of Amsterdam. On 25 May 2021, this panel sent the assessment report to management of this programme. As indicated during the site visit and as confirmed in the report, the panel's judgment with regard to the quality of the programme in terms of the NVAO Assessment framework was conditionally positive with two conditions imposed. These conditions referred to the alignment of the substantive coursework part of the curriculum with the programme intended learning outcomes, and to the requirements for research master students, when taking shared one-year master courses. On 15 February 2022, NVAO published their decision on the accreditation of the programme, this decision being conditionally positive, in agreement with the assessment panel's advice.

The conditions set by NVAO specifically refer to the substantive coursework in the programme curriculum. At the time of the site visit in March 2021, students of this Research Master Communication Science programme took 36 EC (4 courses of 6 EC each and one course of 12 EC) of substantive courses. One of these courses (*Advancing & Building Communication Science Theory*) was tailor-made for the research master programme. The other four substantive courses (30 EC or 3 x 6 EC and 1 x 12 EC) were shared elective one-year master courses. Firstly, the panel was unable to see clear evidence of these elective one-year master courses within the substantive coursework matching the intended learning outcomes of the research master programme. Secondly, in these one-year master courses research master students were not required to do additional, in-depth assignments and, therefore, did not necessarily achieve the research master level. These were the main reasons for the assessment panel in March 2021 to formulate the abovementioned two conditions.

The improvements designed for and implemented in the programme were the joint effort by research master programme management, study advisors, and lecturers and students in the programme. Various options to achieve the improvements needed were discussed by programme management with study advisors, lecturers and students in cycles of reflection, implementation and evaluation. The director and staff of the Graduate School of Communication assisted intensively in realising the improvements.

After having been informed about the conditionally positive judgement and the conditions set, programme management immediately started the process to improve the programme in order to fulfil these conditions. In October 2021, the Repair Plan was drafted and submitted to NVAO. NVAO approved the plan as the adequate basis to achieve the improvements needed. In line with the Repair Plan, programme management undertook action to implement changes to the curriculum in the academic year 2021/2022. These changes constituted replacing one of the shared elective one-year master courses by the newly designed tailor-made substantive research master course

*Good Research Practices* (6 EC) and requiring research master students to take the *Good Research Practices Preparation* (GR2P) seminars and to submit the corresponding assignments in the shared elective one-year master courses. In the academic years after 2021, additional improvements were implemented, such as September-only enrolment and more coherent learning pathways for students through the curriculum. Previously, students could also start in February and the curricula for these students could be rather diverse. In addition to the course *Good Research Practices*, the tailor-made substantive research master course *Understanding Communication Theory* (6 EC) was designed and realised in 2023. This makes the substantive coursework consist of three tailor-made research master courses (50 %) and two shared elective one-year master courses (50 %), the latter including the *Research Practices Preparation* (GR2P) seminars and assignments as extra requirements for research master students.

In the near future, additional improvements will be made. From the academic year 2024/2025 onwards, the fourth tailor-made research master course *Science Communication* (6 EC) will be introduced in the second year of the curriculum. The curriculum starting in 2024/2025 will have within the total substantive coursework (36 EC) four tailor-made research master courses (24 EC or 67 %) and two shared elective one-year master courses (12 EC or 33 %), with the extra requirement for research master students of having to complete GR2P assignments. Students enrolling in the programme in 2024 will all start in September and will all take the fixed foundational first year of the curriculum. The third semester allows students to insert flexibility in their curriculum by offering two options (Academic Track or Professional Track). The fourth semester is meant to complete the research master thesis. Fundamental courses precede more advanced courses in this curriculum.

Throughout the improvement process, research master programme management and Graduate School of Communication staff were in close contact with the Programme Committee and the Examinations Board. The Programme Committee was consulted by programme management throughout the years and gave advice on the improvements. The Examinations Board reviewed the changes made to the programme to meet the conditions set and verified whether course contents, examinations and assessments of the newly designed courses and the GR2P assignments were in line with course goals and programme intended learning outcomes (exit qualifications). In addition, lecturers and students were actively involved in the improvement process. Lecturers designed and realised new courses. Students gave their views in focus groups.

#### *Considerations*

The panel finds Research Master Communication Science programme management and Graduate School of Communication representatives to have put in substantial effort to improve the programme and to fulfil the two conditions set. The panel notes improvements were designed and implemented quite soon after the previous panel's judgement. The panel appreciates the process of continuing improvement throughout the years to try and achieve the level of improvement needed to meet the conditions set. Programme management and the Programme Committee confirmed the *Science Communication* course is prepared and on schedule for implementation in 2024/2025 and onwards.

The panel welcomes the input of study advisors, lecturers and students, who have taken an active role in helping to advance and to shape this process and have been given meaningful opportunities to present their opinions about the best way to design and implement the improvements. The panel has verified the Programme Committee and Examinations Board to have been kept informed and to have been consulted about the improvements made to the programme to fulfil the conditions set. The Programme Committee and the Examinations Board played their part in the changes in accordance with their responsibilities and tasks.

### 3.1 First condition

The first condition is to improve the constructive alignment between the learning goals of the substantive coursework (30 EC) and the intended learning outcomes of the programme. To do so, to be more critical and restrictive with elective courses.

#### *Findings*

Over the last few years, programme management of the research master programme designed new tailor-made substantive research master courses to replace the substantive elective one-year master courses. The goal of these changes was to restrict the number and study load weight of the latter courses and thereby to achieve better alignment between the substantive coursework and the programme intended learning outcomes. Newly designed and realised tailor-made substantive research master courses are *Good Research Practices* (6 EC) in 2021 and *Understanding Communication Theory* (6 EC) in 2023. In the curriculum starting in 2024/2025, the tailor-made research master course *Science Communication* (6 EC) will be added in the fourth semester of the curriculum.

The number of tailor-made research master courses in the substantive coursework has risen from one course (6 EC) in March 2021 to three courses (18 EC) in 2023. The latter accounts for 50 % of the total substantive coursework in the programme. From the academic year 2024/2025 onwards, this number will rise to four courses (24 EC). The number of substantive shared elective one-year master courses decreased proportionally from four courses (30 EC) to two courses (18 EC) and will further be lowered to two courses with diminished study load (12 EC).

Furthermore, in the one-year master courses, research master students are required to take the *Good Research Practices Preparation* course (GR2P), being composed of seminars and related assignments. This GR2P was introduced in September 2021, has remained in place since, and will be continued in the future. The goal of the GR2P is to bring the work done by research master students in the substantive elective one-year master courses to research master level and, thereby, to align these courses with the research master programme intended learning outcomes.

Programme management presented extensive tables to demonstrate the alignment between the newly designed and realised substantive coursework and the programme intended learning outcomes. These tables show the substantive coursework in the curriculum to comply with these intended learning outcomes. It is worth noting the programme intended learning outcomes have not been changed in the course of the years and are the same as those in 2020/2021.

The Programme Committee advised positively on the inclusion of all three newly designed tailor-made substantive research master courses and on the GR2P in the curriculum. The Examinations Board also approved these changes made to the programme. On behalf of this Board, the Assessment Coordinator studied the substantive research master courses as well as the GR2P. The course contents and assessments were found to meet the course goals, which in turn complied with

the assigned programme intended learning outcomes. The GR2P seminars and assignments were found to meet research master level.

#### *Considerations*

The panel welcomes the substantive coursework in the curriculum, being composed of the newly designed tailor-made substantive research master courses and the GR2P. The number of shared elective one-year master courses has been lowered substantially, showing programme management has indeed been more critical and restrictive with regard to these elective courses.

The newly designed and realised substantive research master courses meet the programme intended learning outcomes, so the panel has established. The GR2P seminars and assignments make the substantive shared elective one-year master courses align with the programme intended learning outcomes as well. Therefore, the substantive coursework in the programme curriculum meets the programme intended learning outcomes. The panel has been able to observe this alignment and to derive this also from the extensive tables presented by programme management.

#### *Assessment*

These considerations have led the assessment panel to assess the programme to have fulfilled the first condition.

### 3.2 Second condition

The second condition is to take further actions to differentiate the one-year master and research master programme, and set additional requirements if students take a one-year master course as an elective.

#### *Findings*

The number of shared substantive elective one-year master courses in the curriculum was lowered from four courses (30 EC) in 2021 to three courses (18 EC) and will be further decrease to two courses (12 EC) from the academic year 2024/2025 onwards. As has been said above, these one-year master courses have been replaced by the newly designed and realised tailor-made research master courses *Good Research Practices* (6 EC) and *Understanding Communication Theory* (6 EC). In the near future, the research master course *Science Communication* (6 EC) will be added. These curriculum changes were intended to add to the further differentiation between the one-year master and research master programmes.

In the substantive elective one-year master courses, research master students are required to take *Research Practices Preparation* (GR2P) seminars and make the corresponding assignments. These in-depth seminars and assignments are added for these students to bring these courses to the research master level. Through these GR2P seminars and assignments, the requirements for research master students have been differentiated from those for one-year master students.

As has been indicated above, the Programme Committee was positive about the design and implementation of the three new tailor-made substantive research master courses and the GR2P. The Examinations Board approved these changes as well. Acting for the Examinations Board, the Assessment Coordinator found the contents and assessments of the substantive research master courses to meet the research master level intended learning outcomes of this programme. The Assessment Coordinator found the GR2P seminars and assignments to achieve research master level as well.

#### *Considerations*

The panel sees the replacement of shared one-year master courses by research master courses as positive, as the level of the programme curriculum is raised for research master students, and the one-year master programme and the research master programme are more clearly differentiated. The introduction of the GR2P seminars and assignments in the elective one-year master courses set additional requirements for research master students in these courses.

The panel has established the newly designed tailor-made research master courses to be of research master level. In the panel's view, the GR2P seminars and assignments bring the one-year master courses to research master level.

Therefore, the panel considers the substantive coursework in the curriculum of the programme (newly designed and realised research master courses and GR2P together) to reach research master level.

*Assessment*

These considerations have led the assessment panel to assess the programme to have fulfilled the second condition.

#### 4. Overview of assessments

Standard	Assessment
First condition	Fulfilled
Second condition	Fulfilled
Programme	Positive

## Appendix: Assessment process

University of Amsterdam requested evaluation agency Certiked VBI to support the reassessment process for the Research Master Communication Science programme of this University. The objective of the reassessment process was to verify whether the conditions articulated in the assessment panel report of 25 May 2021 would have been fulfilled.

This reassessment process rests on the decision taken by NVAO on 15 February 2022, in which the accreditation of the programme was prolonged for two years and in which the two conditions to be fulfilled within these two years were formulated.

The panel conducting this reassessment consisted both of members, who had participated in the previous assessment procedures, as well as members, who had not been involved in the previous assessment procedures. The panel was composed as follows:

- Prof. M. Kleemans PhD, Professor Youth, News and Education, Behavioural Science Institute, Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands (panel chair);
- Prof. S. Lecheler PhD, Professor of Political Communication, Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Austria (panel member);
- Prof. H.J. Hospers PhD, Professor Emeritus of Applied Health Psychology, Maastricht University, the Netherlands (panel member);
- Prof. R.K. Gibson PhD, Professor of Politics, Department of Politics, University of Manchester, United Kingdom (panel member);
- H.I. Oberman MSc, PhD candidate Methodology and Statistics, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Utrecht University, the Netherlands (student member).

W. Vercooteren served as the process coordinator/secretary in the reassessment process.

All of the panel members and the process coordinator/secretary confirmed in writing not to have been in situations pointing to conflicts of interest with regard to the programme to be reassessed and to have observed the rules of confidentiality. Having obtained the authorisation by University of Amsterdam, the process coordinator/secretary requested the approval of NVAO of the panel to conduct the reassessment. This approval was given.

To prepare for the programme reassessment, the process coordinator/secretary met with Research Master Communication Science programme management to discuss, among other things, the composition of the information dossier for the assessment panel, the site visit schedule, and the planning of activities in preparation of the site visit. In the course of the process, programme management and the process coordinator/secretary had contact to monitor the process. The activities were performed as planned. Programme management approved the schedule for the site visit.

Prior to the site visit, the panel chair and process coordinator/secretary discussed the procedures with respect to the reassessment process. The panel chair was informed about the competencies, listed in the profile of panel chairs of NVAO. The meeting between the panel chair and the process

coordinator/secretary served as the briefing for panel chairs, as meant in the NVAO profile of panel chairs. The panel chair agreed to work in line with the profile of panel chairs.

Well in advance of the site visit, the information dossier was sent to the panel members. The information dossier contained the following information.

- Recovery Report, Fall 2023
- Programme intended learning outcomes
- Repair Plan, October 2021
- Detailed description of improvement process
- Course file Good Research Practices course
- Course file Understanding Communication Theory course
- Good Research Practices Preparation Programme assignments
- Short description of Science Communication course
- Learning pathways from courses to programme intended learning outcomes
- Student focus group report
- September-only SWOT analysis
- Assessment Coordinator letters of support
- Examinations Board minutes and communication
- Programme Committee minutes and communication

Prior to the site visit date, panel members studied the information dossier of the programme, and forwarded a number of questions to be put to programme representatives on the day of the site visit. The process coordinator/secretary summarised this information, compiling a list of questions, which served as the starting point for the discussions during the site visit.

On 29 November 2023, the panel convened to discuss the preliminary findings with regard to the reassessment of the programme and to go over the questions for the site visit on the basis of the list compiled.

On 30 November 2023, the site visit was conducted in person on the University of Amsterdam campus. Prof. Lecheler was not able to attend the meetings in person, but participated online through video connection. The site visit schedule included the following meetings.

- 09.00 – 10.00 Dean, Graduate School of Communication management, programme management
- 10.15 – 11.00 Lecturers/examiners, including Programme Committee lecturer members
- 11.15 – 12.00 Examinations Board
- 12.15 – 13.00 Students, including Programme Committee student member
- 13.00 – 13.30 Lunch panel (closed session)
- 13.30 – 15.00 Deliberations panel (closed session)
- 15.00 – 15.15 Presentation main findings by panel chair to programme representatives

During the panel deliberations, the panel considered the findings, weighed the considerations and arrived at conclusions with regard to the reassessment of the programme. At the end of the site visit, the panel chair presented the broad outline of considerations and assessments to programme representatives.

The assessment draft report was finalised by the process coordinator/secretary, taking into account the findings, considerations, and assessments of the panel. The draft report was sent to the panel members, who made a number of changes. Thereupon, the secretary edited the report. This report was presented to programme management to be corrected for factual inconsistencies. Programme management were given two weeks to respond. Having been corrected for factual inconsistencies, the final report was sent to the University Board to accompany their request to continue the accreditation of this programme.