

Research Master Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience

Maastricht University

Advisory report

January 28, 2026



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1. SUMMARY

The site visit of the research master Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience of Maastricht University was performed on October 28, 2025 by a panel of peers. Below, the main findings and recommendations of the panel are summarised.

The programme is a two-year, English-taught research master with five specialisations: *Cognitive Neuroscience*, *Clinical Psychology*, *Drug Development & Neurohealth*, *Fundamental Neuroscience*, and *Neuropsychology*. The panel concludes that the programme meets all four NVAO standards.

Standard 1 – Intended learning outcomes

The programme has fifteen intended learning outcomes that are clearly formulated and aligned with the Dublin Descriptors and the additional NVAO criteria for research masters. They reflect a strong research orientation and societal relevance. The panel values the clear profile and integration of EFPA standards. The diversity of the specialisations, including the unique track *Drug Development & Neurohealth*, is considered a strength.

Standard 2 – Teaching-learning environment

The curriculum offers a balanced mix of theory, skills training, and practical research experience. Year 1 includes advanced courses, colloquia, and workshops; year 2 focuses on a substantial research internship and thesis (32 weeks). Students experience the learning environment as stimulating and small-scale, supported by highly qualified and approachable staff. The panel praises the state-of-the-art research facilities and strong link to ongoing research. Recommendations include making the topic research ethics more explicit and strengthening the interdisciplinary approach and its communication. More effort should be put into communicating about teaching methods, and into involving students in the why and how of PBL. Adequate student guidance in choosing electives and adequate scheduling of these electives is also recommended.

Standard 3 – Student assessment

The programme has a robust and transparent assessment system. A variety of assessment methods is used, including essays, research proposals, and thesis evaluations. Quality assurance is effectively organised, with an active Board of Examiners. The panel appreciates the recent introduction of an oral thesis inquiry to mitigate the impact of generative AI. A suggestion for improvement entails ensuring independence between thesis assessors. Specifically for the thesis evaluation form, the panel recommends the programme to provide more explanation to assessors on the six-star system used for thesis evaluation. Furthermore, the programme and the Board of Examiners are recommended by the panel to have a closer look at the assessment procedure and assessment instrument of the clinical internship in the specialisations *Clinical Psychology* and *Neuropsychology*, in order to improve quality assurance.

Standard 4 – Achieved learning outcomes

The reviewed theses demonstrate that students achieve the intended final level. The quality of the research projects is high, showing mastery of the empirical cycle. Alumni confirm that the programme prepares them well for careers in research or clinical practice. More than half of graduates proceed to

PhD positions; others find employment in healthcare, industry, or education. The programme maintains strong alumni engagement and uses this network to support career orientation.

Overall conclusion

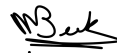
The panel concludes that the Research Master Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience meets all standards and thus rates the overall quality of the programme as positive.

The chair and secretary of the panel hereby declare that all members of the panel have considered this report and agree with the judgements recorded in the report. They confirm that the assessment was carried out in accordance with the requirements regarding independence.

January 28, 2026



Sander Nieuwenhuis
(chair)



Marlies van Beek
(secretary)

2. INTRODUCTION

Procedure

Maastricht University has appointed Odion Onderzoek to coordinate the external quality assessment of the research master's programme Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience. This assessment is conducted in the context of the accreditation of a cluster of research master's programmes: cluster WO OZM Cognitive Neurosciences 1. This cluster comprises four research master's programmes: Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience at Maastricht University, Cognitive Neuroscience at Radboud University Nijmegen, Neurosciences at VU University and Neuroscience at Erasmus MC.

Drs. Marlies van Beek from Odion Onderzoek acted as project leader of this cluster and secretary for the research master's programme at Maastricht University.

The assessment was conducted in accordance with the procedures and standards of the NVAO's "Assessment Framework for the Accreditation System of Higher Education in the Netherlands" (Government Gazette 2024, no. 6405) and the additional criteria for research master's programmes (NVAO 2016). The programmes within this cluster are existing programmes, and the four institutions involved hold a positive institutional audit decision on quality assurance.

The panel was asked to evaluate the programme using a self-evaluation report and interviews with its representatives. The assessment was performed according to the four standards outlined in the NVAO assessment framework, including the additional criteria for research master's programmes.

The research master Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience of Maastricht University was reaccredited in 2020. This site visit was performed on October 28, 2025. The programme composed a panel of peers for the evaluation:

- Prof. dr. Sander Nieuwenhuis (chair), Full Professor, Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Cognitive Psychology Unit, Leiden University. Chair Research Master Program Committee;
- Prof. dr. Jocelien Olivier, Associate Professor, Faculty of Science and Engineering Rijksuniversiteit Groningen; Olivier lab - Developmental Behavioural Neuroscience;
- Prof. dr. Guy Vingerhoets, Full Professor, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Department of Experimental clinical and health psychology, Ghent University;
- Matilde Ruo (student member), Master's student Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, master Behavioural and Cognitive Neurosciences, N track (Molecular and Clinical Neurosciences).

The panel was supported by drs. Marlies van Beek from Odion Onderzoek as secretary.

Prior to the assessment process, the panel chair completed a training course on the NVAO's "Assessment Framework for the Accreditation System of Higher Education in the Netherlands" (2024). The cluster project leader discussed the standards, procedures, and responsibilities with the chair in accordance with the "Profile of the Chair" (NVAO, 2016) and the guidelines provided in the NVAO training course "Train the Chair." The other panel members received instructions by the secretary during a kick-off meeting, where the secretary informed them about the content and purpose of the assessment framework, as well as the procedure, intended attitude, working methods, and timeline within the cluster. Special attention was given to the NVAO's "Specifications of additional criteria for research master's Programmes" (May, 2016).

Prior to the site visit, the research master's programme Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience submitted a list of final theses/reports of recent graduates. In consultation with the secretary, the panel chair selected twenty final theses/reports, taking into account a spread of final grades, assessors, and the five specialisations. The panel reviewed the selected final theses and accompanying assessment forms. The panel assessed the theses in accordance with the NVAO guidelines for the review of final projects (Implementation Regulations, September 2024). An overview of the reviewed materials, including the selected theses, is provided in Annex 5.

The documentation was made available to the panel in a secured online environment on September 15, 2025. In the run-up to the site visit, the panel studied the self-evaluation report and several supporting documents. All documents examined by the panel are available in Annex 5. The self-evaluation report provides insights into the programme and a reflection on the strengths and weaknesses per NVAO standard. The panel shared their first impressions with the secretary, who made an overview of these first impressions and shared these with the panel members. The panel members discussed their impressions and identified key issues during an online preparatory meeting on October 20. On October 28, discussions took place between the panel and various representatives of the programme at the site visit. An overview of the site visit programme is attached in Annex 1. At the end of this site visit, the panel deliberated on findings, considerations and recommendations concerning strengths and areas for development related to the four NVAO standards. Subsequently, the chair presented the initial conclusions reached by the panel to the programme management team and a delegation of the various representatives. A draft version of the report containing the panel's findings and considerations was prepared by the secretary after the site visit and was sent to the panel members for comments. The draft report was then edited based on the panel's comments and subsequently endorsed by the chair. After that, the secretary sent the report to Maastricht University to review any factual inaccuracies. Upon their response, this report has been finalised and endorsed by the chair.

Staff members and students of this research master's programme at the Maastricht University were informed by the faculty in advance about the possibility to speak confidentially with the panel. Participants could register with the secretary by email. A week prior to the site visit, an open consultation hour was scheduled for registered participants. No responses were received whereby the open consultation hour was cancelled.

Institution and programmes

Maastricht University (UM) is a European University and its mission is to “empower students from around the world to become active, globally minded citizens and critical thinkers.”

Education and research at UM are closely linked, reflecting values such as innovation, sustainability, and social responsibility. The university prepares students to contribute meaningfully to society through small-scale problem-based learning (PBL) in an international and intercultural setting, enriched with technology.

The Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience (FPN) of Maastricht University (UM) is dedicated to upholding high standards in both education and research. FPN has experienced significant growth, offering two Bachelor of Science programmes (Psychology and Brain Science) and five master’s programmes (apart from this research master Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience: Master Psychology, Forensic Psychology, Mental Health, and the International Master of Research in Work and Organisational Psychology).

The two-year research master Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience is coordinated and taught (in large part) by staff from various departments within the faculty, including the departments Cognitive Neuroscience, Clinical Psychological Science, Methods and Statistics, and Neuropsychology and Psychopharmacology. Additionally, staff from the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML) contributes to the education programme.

As an international university, UM has a bilingual policy (Dutch and English). Depending on the content of the programme, the background of the participating students, the learning objectives and the career prospects of the students, the language of instruction may be either Dutch (MSc Mental Health) or English (BSc Brain Science, MSc Psychology, Research Master Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience, MSc Forensic Psychology, International Master of Research in Work and Organisational Psychology) or both (BSc Psychology).

At the start of the academic year 2024-2025, FPN served over 2,500 students and employed approximately 270 academic staff members. With its strong international profile, FPN provides education within an international classroom setting, fostering a diverse and inclusive learning environment.

3. PROGRAMME ASSESSMENT

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.

Finding and considerations

The two-year research master's programme Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience is positioned at master's level with a strong emphasis on research and academic rigor. This master-level orientation is reflected in the programme's focus on advanced knowledge, research, and critical analysis. Students are expected to demonstrate independence in designing and conducting research. The research master's programme is designed to address fundamental scientific and societal questions related to cognition, mental health, and disease, which form the core of cognitive and clinical neuroscience.

The focus of the programme is the relationship between brain function, cognition, and behaviour. Understanding this relationship requires a broad interdisciplinary foundation, drawing on fields such as (clinical) psychology, (computational) neuroscience, engineering, (molecular) biology, brain anatomy, and psychiatry (Self Evaluation Report). Given the diverse nature of these disciplines, the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience (FPN) has structured the research master's programme in five specialisations (related to five domains):

1. Cognitive Neuroscience (CN)
2. Clinical Psychology (CP)
3. Drug Development & Neurohealth (DN)
4. Fundamental Neuroscience (FN)
5. Neuropsychology (NP).

The programme aims to prepare students for careers as junior researchers or research-trained clinical practitioners, combining research expertise with (clinical) applications. The programme aims to train the junior researchers in approaches and methods that are required for future scientific and technological progress, and for new approaches to promote mental health, to diagnose or treat brain disease, or provide help in dealing with handicaps (cognitive, emotional, and behavioural) due to brain problems. The programme also offers opportunities for students working towards a clinical or mental health career as a psychologist.

Intended learning outcomes

The programme formulated 15 intended learning outcomes for the research master's programme (Annex 3). According to the panel, these learning outcomes (ILOs) are clearly formulated and correspond to the research master's level. There is a clear distinction between knowledge, application, judgements, communication, and lifelong learning skills. The ILOs are aligned with the Dublin Descriptors and the domain-specific reference frame for master's level educational programmes in the Neurosciences. The

programme has also integrated the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA) standards in its intended learning outcomes.

According to the panel, the research master's programme shows a clear profile. The intended learning outcomes of the programme, with its study load of 120 EC, seem well aligned with current national and international developments in the field of cognitive and clinical neuroscience. The programme primarily aims to prepare students for an academic career, but with its ILOs it also ensures that the acquired research skills and knowledge can be used in other professional areas, such as mental health care or the pharmaceutical industry. A positive highlight is the focus on societal relevance, supported by a strong interest in staying up to date with how neuroscientists contribute to society. The panel sees it as a particular strength that the research master, in addition to its more central research aims, is also concerned with the clinical trajectories that some students might pursue. In the opinion of the panel, society will certainly benefit from clinicians trained to think as researchers.

Additionally, the panel finds the aim of the programme and its specialisations very diverse in terms of disciplines, content and methods. The specialisation *Drug Development & Neurohealth* is probably unique for a neuroscience research master in the Netherlands.

Conclusions

Based on the documentation and conversations, the panel concludes that the research master's programme **meets standard 1: Intended learning outcomes**.

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.

Finding and considerations

The first year of the curriculum consists of theoretical courses, colloquia, skills training, workshops and electives (see Annex 4 for a curriculum overview). Students follow courses tailored to the focus area of their chosen specialisation, together with some skills training and workshops that are shared across multiple specialisations. Year 2 also starts with theoretical and practical research training modules, after which students spend most of their time on their research internship and master thesis (32 weeks). Except for CP and NP, the specialisations devote a total of 50 EC to the research proposal, research internship, and the master thesis. Students of the specialisations CP and NP may choose to condense their research proposal, internship and master's thesis from 50 to 30 EC and combine this project with a clinical internship, clinical activities report, and corresponding minor's thesis for 20 EC.

Student selection and admission

Admission to the research master Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience is based on a holistic evaluation by the Board of Admissions (BoA). Taken into account are the applicant's academic background, motivation, research interest, and relevant skills. In addition to holding a relevant bachelor's degree,

applicants must submit a curriculum vitae, a motivation letter, an academic background form, a transcript of grades, and proof of English proficiency. Selected candidates are invited for an interview (online or in person).

Based on the documentation and conversation with the staff, the panel is impressed by the effort put into this holistic evaluation of candidates, based on the admission requirements. The panel compliments the programme with their courage to also admit motivated students with a rather different background and with the programme's emphasis on "capturing talent" and looking for potential. Students describe the application process as thorough, fair and well-aligned with the programme's academic demands (student chapter of the Self Evaluation Report).

During the introduction week, each specialisation organizes an information session on the programme's structure, content, and expectations regarding self-study and workload. Some students, especially those with different backgrounds, receive tailored support in preparing them prior to the start of the programme. Based on experience, the programme seems to know well what is needed and is able to manage expectations of students adequately. For example, all admitted candidates receive a statistics checklist and are provided with recommended sources, such as books and courses, to help them prepare for the start of the curriculum. Current students report that these remedial measures help them close knowledge gaps, and bring them up to par with their peers.

The curriculum

According to the panel, the curriculum has a proper balance of theory and practice. The curriculum provides an attractive mix of theoretical courses, skills labs and workshops, interdisciplinary colloquia, elective courses and practical training on statistics and research grant writing.

In general the panel sees the ILOs well covered in the curriculum, including in all the specialisations. In conversation with the teaching staff the panel learned that ILO 15 on ethical dimensions of research and practice is integrated in the curriculum: in the colloquium series, in symposia and through courses that, for example, address biases and stigma. However, students mention the topic research ethics to be underrepresented in the curriculum. The programme acknowledges that the integrated approach could be made more explicit from the outset. The panel therefore recommends the programme developing a stronger grasp of where in the curriculum the topic of research ethics is addressed, or to consider clustering the various aspects of research ethics into a dedicated course.

In order to keep up with ongoing developments the panel is positive about the programme's plan for a programme revision in 2027-2028, in which they aim to put more emphasis on computational research approaches, including data science, coding and computational modelling. Since the panel learned from the documentation and conversation with staff that SPSS is still the most used software, the panel urges the programme to change this to R or JASP. This would also mean that education on the use of R is provided by the programme.

Interdisciplinary approach

ILO 1 of the research master programme focuses on ‘ensuring that students gain a deep understanding of the key theories, processes, interventions, instruments, and assessment methods within their chosen specialisation, as well as from interdisciplinary perspectives.’

Based on the documentation, the panel wondered to what extent it is possible to foster an interdisciplinary approach, given that students, with the many courses specific for their specialisation, specialise early in the first semester of the programme. In conversations with staff, the panel learned that this interdisciplinary approach is applied explicitly in elements of the programme in the second semester of year 1: first in the colloquia series and later in the Grant Writing Workshop. In the colloquia, topics that are transcending the specialisations are introduced and discussed, fostering interaction among students and staff of different specialisations. In the Grant Writing Workshop and Grant Writing Course, students from several specialisations work on research proposals in small groups, supervised by a member of the academic staff.

Although these seem strong elements of the programme, the panel is somewhat skeptical about the way in which this interdisciplinary approach can be realised. That is, it is not a given that students are able to understand each other well, after coming from, and further specializing in, very different domains. In conversations with students the panel was somewhat confirmed in this regard: students explained that in the colloquia they often work on their own suggested topics. Other topics, outside their domain, require a rather high level of understanding to fully grasp. This, in combination with ‘difficult’ courses running parallel to the colloquia, makes it hard for the students to optimally benefit from the colloquia. The students also believe that the Grant Writing Workshop, at the end of year 1, comes rather late to actually foster finding common ground on very diverse topics. In practice, the small group work is often carried out with students from the same specialisation and in that sense is not contributing to interdisciplinary thinking.

The panel finds that this discrepancy between the ideas of the staff about interdisciplinary learning and the experiences of the students needs attention. The panel argues that by starting with defining what interdisciplinarity means for this particular programme, the according implementation and fostering could be further improved. Also, students could then be more involved in the why and how of interdisciplinary learning. According to the panel, such improvements may also be realized in the courses of which staff argued that these are interdisciplinary by nature because of the (often) diverse background of students and staff members. The panel finds that an interdisciplinary approach should become a more deliberate aspect of the programme that is not left up to chance.

Teaching methods

The panel appreciates the teaching method problem-based learning (PBL), emphasizing both knowledge and skills through small-group tutoring by experts in their field. However, as described for the interdisciplinary approach, the didactic approach and method also seem to differ slightly between ideas (of the teachers) and experiences (of the students). Students who got their bachelor’s at Maastricht University (where PBL is the general teaching method) commented that the teaching method in this research master’s programme is (very) different, although it was advertised as PBL.

Other students mention that the method seems to be more project-based rather than problem-based. Students therefore also suggested not to advertise it as PBL.

From conversations with teachers, however, the panel learned that teachers embrace their teaching method and are very capable of explaining the method in detail, including the educational philosophy behind it. The panel therefore encourages the programme to put more effort into communicating clearly about their teaching methods, and involving students in PBL more explicitly. This also entails managing the expectations of former bachelor's students of their own university, by explaining the differences between the implementations of PBL between the bachelor's and this research master's programme.

Electives

In their Self Evaluation Report (SER) the programme describes the attention given to an adequate balance between providing a coherent curriculum for each specialisation and at the same time offering sufficient choice for students to enrich their research profile. Students have the option to fulfil their elective requirements either by conducting an individual research project or by enrolling in a course from another specialisation. In the reaccreditation process of this research master's programme in 2019, the panel at that time recommended the programme "to investigate whether the scheduling of electives could be improved to make it easier to choose electives in subdomains."

In response to the panel's feedback at that time, various efforts have been made. The application procedure for course electives within other specialisations has been simplified, efforts to streamline applications for course electives offered by other faculties were made, and the statistics curriculum was revised in 2023–2024, ensuring more diverse statistical training tailored to the methodological expertise required in different specialisations and research domains. Furthermore, the colloquium series was updated to include five specialisation-specific topics alongside five overarching topics with relevance across all specialisations.

The current panel is positive about these developments. However, from the student's chapter (SER) and conversations with students, the panel learned that electives are offered, but are sometimes either very hard to combine with core courses, or it is unclear for students if these electives are feasible at all in terms of scheduling. Current students therefore suggest designating a specific period for course electives. The panel is positive about the programme following up on this suggestion, by the intention to revise the curriculum (2027-2028) including periods designated to elective courses (mentioned in the SER). Although the panel does not necessarily recommend offering more electives, it does want to recommend the programme to make sure that effort is put into adequate student guidance. This includes clear and timely communication about electives. Since the majority of students tend to choose writing a research paper or participating in performing a research project over taking elective courses, the panel recommends maintaining these options.

Facilities

The programme has at its disposal good research facilities for teaching purposes, which cover the diverse needs of all specialisations. These include neuroimaging facilities, non-invasive brain stimulation, EEG, virtual reality, and behavioural labs. According to the panel, these facilities are state

of the art, including in-house high-field-MRI scanners. During skills courses students receive hands-on experiences at the facilities relevant for their specialisation.

Teaching staff

More than half of all education in the research master's programme is carried out by senior researchers and professors. Based on the documentation, there is a balanced mix of expertise and experience levels. The research master's programme requires all staff members to have or obtain the Dutch University Teaching Qualification (UTQ) within 2 years after employment. Furthermore, a UTQ is mandatory for teaching staff with specific academic profiles, including assistant professors (UD), associate professors (UHD), and full professors.

The senior staff demonstrates a strong track record of high-quality scientific research supported by prestigious national and international funding sources and extensive international collaborations. They provide supervision for internships and master theses, offering mentorship in their areas of expertise. According to the report on the Quality Assessment of Research in Psychology (SEP protocol report 2017-2022), 'there is a broad spectrum of research at this Faculty (FPN), ranging from fundamental work to applied work, with around half of the outputs attracting above average citations, given the type of publication, research field, and year of publication, including some papers that are outstanding in this respect.'

Based on the documentation and on conversations with students, the panel is pleased to see that also the students are very positive about their teachers: they are knowledgeable, approachable and dedicated.

Student guidance during internships

Based on the site visit in 2019, the panel at that time recommended more contact for students with the programme during their internship period. The panel is positive about the actions taken. This relates to enhancing structured communication between internal supervisors and students at designated intervals: at the start and half way the internship period the supervisors provide academic and professional support.

Studying with a disability or chronic illness

Maastricht University offers a range of services for students with disabilities such as physical, psychological, and sensory disabilities, chronic illnesses, and other conditions such as dyslexia, ADHD, autism, or Crohn's disease. Furthermore, students may contact the academic advisors at the faculty to discuss their circumstances and the assistance they may require. These services and facilities to enhance academic success and student well-being are defined in the UM policy plan 'Studying with a disability and/or chronic illness'.

At FPN, several facilities are available related to the exams (time, conditions), education and other facilities, such as the use of a resting room for students to take a break and specially allocated rooms for tutorials and lectures that comply with basic and integral accessibility and use requirements. The criteria for these facilities are based on individual students' needs in relation to their educational requirements at the time. A tailored study plan can be drafted by the student together

with the academic advisor and in consultation with the specialisation coordinator who can provide input. The panel is positive about these facilities.

English language

English is the common language in the field of cognitive neuroscience and the panel therefore recognises the international name and the international orientation of the programme. The international orientation of the programme is reflected in both the curriculum and the international student and staff (research groups) population. In the academic year 2024-2025, students enrolled in this programme represented 34 nationalities. As of the academic year 2019-2020, staff must have a CEFR C1 level of English in order to teach English-language courses, and in the National Student Survey (NSE) students evaluate this aspect of teaching as very positive.

Employability

At the re-accreditation in 2019 the panel at that time recommended the programme to pay more attention to job opportunities other than PhD positions. While more than half of the students secure a PhD position before their graduation, the programme finds it important to highlight career opportunities outside academia. The panel is positive about the way the programme has followed up on these recommendations: professionalisation events have been organised since 2021, where alumni from both academic and non-academic sectors present. In 2022–2023, the format was expanded to include a series of career-focused lectures and workshops in collaboration with UM Career Services. In 2023 the career afternoon was introduced, offering students the opportunity to attend employability and vacancy search lectures, participate in workshops, and engage with alumni in both formal and informal settings. The programme has evaluated these initiatives among students and has received positive feedback, particularly regarding the Alumni Perspectives sessions, which facilitate direct interaction with graduates working in various fields.

The panel learned from conversations with students that these events and activities are very important to them. The panel endorses the programme's effort and encourages the programme to keep communicating clearly about these events in order to reach all possibly interested students.

Conclusions

Based on the documentation and conversations the panel concludes that the research master's programme **meets standard 2: Teaching-learning environment.**

Standard 3: student assessment

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

Finding and considerations

Assessment system

The assessment policy of FPN is clearly described and aligns with the UM assessment philosophy. The assessment programme, which demonstrates the coverage of the programme's ILO's in the course assessments, is evaluated on a yearly basis.

The curriculum places a strong emphasis on writing skills, and students receive feedback on assignments, such as essays, literature reviews, opinion pieces, and research proposals. In conversations with students the panel learned that students would sometimes appreciate more timely and useful feedback on their work. Although in general the grading is perceived as fair, students sometimes seem to expect more feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of, for example, their writing skills. The suggestion of the panel for the programme would be to clarify within the assessment programme when which type of feedback is provided, to optimise the student's learning process. Since the panel and the students see the willingness of the teachers to provide feedback, the teacher's workload could also benefit from a more deliberate feedback plan in the assessment programme. The programme and the teachers could then make sure that the timing and purpose of feedback is communicated clearly to students.

Following recommendations made by the panel during the site visit in 2019, attention is given to integrating information on assessment details in course manuals and the Canvas learning platform. The panel is pleased to see the initiative of the faculty for a project (started in spring 2025) that continues to monitor the quality of course assessments, specifically on the aspect of transparency.

Measures are put in place that contribute to valid and reliable assessment: detailed information on assessment methods for students, training programmes in assessment for the staff, transparent guidelines and standard assessment forms for the master thesis internship.

Board of examiners

The Board of Examiners (BoE) is involved in enhancing assessment methods and in optimising the scheduling of assessments. The Board takes samples of course manuals to review transparency of assessments and communicates about this with the course coordinators. The Board has monthly meetings with the educational team and the track coordinators about assessment aspects. In conversations with the BoE the panel learned that thesis assessments are reviewed by the Board of Examiners on several aspects, including grading, provided feedback and the alignment between these two aspects.

Next to the BoE, FPN has a Test Committee (TC). The TC is an independent body that advises the management team on exam quality when requested. It also assists course coordinators in developing and scoring exam questions by providing guidance and collaborating as needed. The TC is responsible for reviewing the quality of course exams at the request of the educational management, the BoE, or as

part of the regular FPN Quality Cycle of Assessment. During these reviews, the TC provides feedback to course coordinators.

Thesis and internship assessment

Students of this research master's programme are required to complete a research internship of 32 weeks, starting with the design and writing of a research proposal as part of the Grant Writing Workshop and Grant Writing Course. This process embraces the full research cycle of an empirical study, culminating in the master's thesis. The thesis is assessed by a first and second supervisor. Related to the thesis assessment procedure, the programme followed up on the recommendation of the site visit panel in 2019 to elaborate this procedure. The assessment forms for both the thesis and internship have been updated and further refined. A six-star rating system is used in the assessment form to guide the assessors; however a clear explanation for what each star represents (i.e. a rubric), is missing. Providing this explanation will promote consistency across assessors. Additionally, to improve transparency in assessment, clearer guidelines have been incorporated to align evaluations with final grades. The current panel compliments the programme on these improvements. The panel also welcomes the introduction of an oral master thesis inquiry to reduce the impact of GenAI on the assessment of acquired skills. As of 2025-2026 this has become mandatory, and consists of students presenting their work to their research groups, including the first supervisor and a second assessor.

Overall, the panel is positive about the thesis assessment procedures and assessment forms in place. A concern, however, is the extent to which the first and second assessor are independent in assessing the student's work. Since situations could be imagined where the first and second assessor closely work together (i.e. in a hierarchical relationship), more attention could be paid to assure independent grading.

Students enrolled in the specialisations *Neuropsychology* or *Clinical Psychology* have the opportunity – next to the master thesis internship – to complete a full-time clinical internship of 15 EC, which is concluded with a clinical assessment report (CAR) and a minor's thesis. Based on the documentation and final products, including clinical parts, it was not clear to the panel how this clinical part is assessed: what are the precise assessment criteria, how are clinical skills assessed and what does the final grade entail? Since during the site visit this did not become much clearer, the panel recommends the Board of Examiners to have a closer look at the assessment (procedure and instrument) of this clinical internship in order to better be able to assure its quality.

Conclusions

Based on the documentation and conversations the panel concludes that the research master's programme **meets standard 3: Student assessment**.

Standard 4: achieved learning outcomes

The programme demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.

Finding and considerations

Master theses level

The research internship and master's thesis (including the research proposal) form a substantial part of the programme, weighing 50/120 EC. The research part requires students to design, conduct, and analyse an independent research project, culminating in a scientific report. Overall high grades, thesis prizes, and peer-reviewed international publications demonstrate the quality of the student's research projects.

The panel selected and reviewed a total of 20 final theses of the master's programme, divided over the five specialisations and varying in grades (6.5 – 10). Most of these theses were considered by the panel to be of high quality. The assessment covers all relevant aspects of the intended learning outcomes. The theses show that students master all steps in the empirical cycle. Overall, the research questions seem to be relevant and well embedded in recent research.

In conversations with alumni during the site visit, the panel was pleased to hear that they reported to be well prepared for their future career (PhD or other) after graduating from the research master's programme.

Alumni

An employability analysis (2024) for the research master Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience shows its success in preparing graduates for meaningful and relevant career paths. A significant proportion of alumni is currently employed in fields closely related to the programme's interdisciplinary focus and intended learning outcomes. Between 2019 – 2023 56.1% of graduates pursued a PhD after completing the programme.

Also based on LinkedIn data of alumni, the research master's programme shows to be effective in achieving its intended learning outcomes, with graduates who are well-equipped for careers in research, healthcare, business, and higher education.

The panel appreciates the programme's response to previous recommendations on further strengthening the programme's contact with alumni. FPN alumni are currently involved by contributing to the faculty's annual Psychological Perspectives and Alumni Perspectives events. Alumni provide interactive workshops on their current work and join sessions with students discussing studies and careers, followed by Q&A sessions. Through these activities current students have the opportunity to engage with alumni and in this way obtain better insight into possible future careers inside as well as outside academia. The central alumni office also hosts "Coach Cafés," specifically designed for recent graduates and young alumni. These events encourage participants to explore their career opportunities and expand their professional network with the help of coaches and alumni.

Conclusions

Based on the documentation and conversations the panel concludes that the research master's programme **meets standard 4: Achieved learning outcomes**.

Final conclusion

The NVAO approved panel has assessed the programme against four standards. The panel concludes that the research master's programme Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience meets all standards (intended learning outcomes, teaching-learning environment, student assessment and achieved learning outcomes) and thus rates the overall quality of the programme as positive.

Standard	Judgement
Intended learning outcomes <i>Standard 1: The intended learning outcomes tie in with the level and orientation of the programme; they are geared to the expectations of the professional field, the discipline and international requirements.</i>	Meets the standard
Teaching-learning environment <i>Standard 2: The curriculum, the teaching-learning environment and the quality of the teaching staff enable the incoming students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.</i>	Meets the standard
Student assessment <i>Standard 3: The programme has an adequate system of assessment in place.</i>	Meets the standard
Achieved learning outcomes <i>Standard 4: The programme demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.</i>	Meets the standard
Final conclusion	positive

In the preceding paragraphs, the panel has discussed and substantiated its positive comments on the programme for each standard. The programme is commended for the following features of good practice:

- The aim of the programme and its specialisations are very diverse in terms of disciplines, content and methods
- In addition to its more central research aims, it is a strength that the research master's programme is also concerned with the clinical trajectories that some students might pursue
- The effort put into the holistic evaluation in the admission procedure, as well as tailored guidance in preparing students well before the start of their programme
- The programme has good research facilities for teaching purposes, which cover the diverse needs of all specialisations
- The teachers of the research master's programme are described as knowledgeable, approachable and dedicated
- The effort of the programme put into highlighting career opportunities outside academia, cooperating with alumni in realising this aim

In this report, the panel makes a suggestion/observation, which are not strictly recommendations.

- Put more effort into assuring independency between the first and second assessor of the thesis

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

Related to standard 2:

- Develop a stronger plan and implementation of where in the curriculum the topic research ethics is addressed
- Define what interdisciplinarity means for this particular programme and further spell out the approach to teachers and students
- Put more effort into communicating about the teaching methods, and into involving students in the why and how of PBL
- Make sure that effort is put into adequate student guidance in choosing electives and into adequate scheduling of these electives

Related to standard 3:

- the programme and the Board of Examiners are recommended to have a closer look at the assessment procedure and assessment instrument of the clinical internship in the specialisations Clinical Psychology and Neuropsychology, in order to better be able to assure its quality
- Provide further explanation for assessors on the grading (six-star) system for theses.

1. ANNEXES

Annex 1: Administrative data

Institution	
Name in RIO	Universiteit Maastricht
Adress	Minderbroedersberg 4-6, 6211 LK, Maastricht
Website	www.maastrichtuniversity.nl
BRIN number	21PJ
Status of the Institution	Publicly Funded
Institutional quality assurance assessment (ITK)	Approved, valid up to and including May 31, 2031

Programme	
Programme name in RIO	M Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience (research)
International name	M Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience (research)
Location	Maastricht
Programme number in RIO	60121
Orientation and level	Academic Master
Research master	Yes
Language of instruction	English
(Legal) professional requirements	No
Specialisations	- Cognitive Neuroscience (CN) - Drug Development and Neurohealth (DN) - Fundamental Neuroscience (FN) - Neuropsychology (NP) - Clinical Psychology (CP), previously named Psychopathology
Joint programme	No
Distinctive feature	No
Degree awarded and addition to the degree	Master of Science
Study load in EC	120 European Credits
Variant(s) (full-time, part-time, dual)	Full-time
Working with units of learning outcomes (full-time, part-time, dual)	No
External assessment group classification	WO OZM Cogn/Neurowet 1
Submission date of accreditation report	May 1, 2026
Other (e.g. name change or extension of study duration)	No

Annex 2: Site visit

Site Visit Schedule – Research Master Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience, Maastricht University

October 28, 2025 Time	What	Who
09.00-09.10	Welcome	Programme director RMa CCN Vice-dean Education FPN Policy advisor
09.10-09.45	<i>Panel preparation</i>	
09.45-10.30	Session 1: Interview management	Programme director RMa CCN Vice-dean Education FPN Education director FPN and other
10.30-10.45	<i>Panel deliberation</i>	
10.45-11.45	Session 2: Interview teaching staff and academic advising	
11.45-12.00	<i>Panel deliberation</i>	
12.00-13.00	Session 3: Interview students & alumni	
13.00-13.30	<i>Panel deliberation and lunch</i>	
13.30-14.15	Session 4: Interview Board of Examiners and Test Committee	
14.15-15.00	<i>Panel deliberation</i>	
15.00-16.30	Development oriented session: Future-proofing the Research Master CCN 1 moderator. 3 groups: 1 panel member, 2 staff members, 1 student per group (incl. student panel member), 1 alumnus per group	
16.30-16.45	<i>Panel deliberation</i>	
16.45-17.15	Concluding session management	
17.15-17.45	<i>Panel deliberation</i>	
17.45-18.00	Oral report preliminary panel findings	

Annex 3: Learning outcomes of the programme

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) of the Research Master's Programme		
Level		Content/orientation
Dublin	NLQF	ILOs based on domain-specific reference framework and EFPA
Knowledge and understanding	Knowledge	ILO 1: Knowledge of theories, processes, interventions, instruments, and assessment methods in the field of one's specialisation and interdisciplinary perspectives.
Applying knowledge and understanding	Skills (cognitive, practical)	ILO 2: Ability to operationalise theories into empirical or clinical research with the proper use of experimental design principles, methods, and measuring instruments.
	Skills (cognitive)	ILO 3: Ability to write an original and feasible research question and transform this question into a research and/or grant proposal.
	Knowledge, Skills (practical)	ILO 4: Ability to select and apply appropriate research methods and statistical techniques, instruments, and assessment methods to conduct research in the field.
Making judgments	Skills (cognitive)	ILO 5: Ability to critically judge research questions and experimental designs.
	Knowledge, Skills (cognitive)	ILO 6: Ability to critically analyse, evaluate, and interpret research methods, data analysis, and theories in publications in the field.
	Knowledge	ILO 7: Ability to relate findings to the existing literature and formulate realistic judgements on the implications and importance of research output.
Communication	Skills (communication)	ILO 8: Ability to effectively communicate in English – in writing and orally (group discussions and presentations) – on field-related topics.
	Skills (communication)	ILO 9: Ability to write scientific reports in the form of a practical report, master's thesis, grant proposal, and/or scientific publication according to the scientific standards.
	Skills (communication)	ILO 10: Ability to communicate scientific theories and empirical findings in an understandable way to professionals (experts and non-experts).
Lifelong learning skills	Skills (learning, Responsibility & Autonomy)	ILO 11: Ability to reflect on one's own professional behaviour and development.
	Context, Responsibility & Autonomy	ILO 12: Ability to work in a research setting and/or in an applied/clinical setting.
	Context, Skills (learning)	ILO 13: Ability to work in an international team.
	Skills (social)	ILO 14: Ability to identify gaps in one's own knowledge and to develop an individual learning plan accordingly.
	Knowledge, Responsibility & Autonomy	ILO 15: Ability to understand, reflect upon, and act according to the ethical standards of research and practice in the field.

Annex 4: Curriculum overview

YEAR 1						YEAR 2	
P1 (8w)	P2 (8w)	P3 (4w)	P4 (8w)	P5 (8w)	P6 (4w)	P1 (8w)	P2 - P6 (32w)
Core Courses							Research Internship <i>optional:</i> Clinical Internship (NP, CP)
Skills & Workshops							
Electives							
Applied Statistics I			Applied Statistics II				
		Colloquia					
					GWW	GWC	

Annex 5: Documents

Materials made available before the site visit:

- Self Evaluation Report Rma CCN (including students chapter)
- Report previous accreditation (2020)
- Examples of course manuals (9)
- Examples of test (6) 2024-2025
- Report Research Review Psychology (2017-2022)
- Appendices SER
 - 1) Appendix 1 Strategic Plan for Education 2024-2028
 - 2) Appendix 2 NLQF Level 7 – Dublin Descriptors
 - 3) Appendix 3 Domain Specific Reference Frame for master’s level educational programmes in the Neurosciences and intended learning outcomes
 - 4) Appendix 4 Nominal Plan RMa CCN 2025-2026
 - 5) Appendix 5 Supervisor Electives Manual RMa CCN
 - 6) Appendix 6 Education and Examination Regulations RMa CCN 2025-2026
 - 7) Appendix 7 Overview of courses RMa CCN 2025-2026
 - 8) Appendix 8 UM Language Policy 2022-2024 (still valid)
 - 9) Appendix 9 Results National Student Inquiry (NSE) RMa CCN 2025
 - 10) Appendix 10 Management Information RMa CCN
 - 11) Appendix 11 UM policy plan studying with a disability and/ or chronic illness
 - 12) Appendix 12 Overview of expertise RMa CCN
 - 13) Appendix 13 University Teaching Qualification Leaflet Maastricht University
 - 14) Appendix 14 Overview local facilities used during skills courses and internships
 - 15) Appendix 15 UM Vision on Assessment
 - 16) Appendix 16 FPN Assessment Policy
 - 17) Appendix 17 Assessment Programme RMa CCN 2025-2026
 - 18) Appendix 18 FPN RACI Assessment Overview
 - 19) Appendix 19 Information on Umployee about Assessment
 - 20) Appendix 20 Rules and Regulations 2025-2026
 - 21) Appendix 21 Guidelines and requirements for the Master’s thesis, CAR, and minor’s thesis
 - 22) Appendix 22 Annual Report of the Board of Examiners of FPN 2023-2024
 - 23) Appendix 23 GenAI Policy FPN – June 2025
 - 24) Appendix 24 UM Policy Framework on Generative AI
 - 25) Appendix 25 Winners RMa CCN Maastricht University student prizes
 - 26) Appendix 26 Employability Analysis Research Master CCN 2024

Final theses

The received list of final theses contains 212 final theses in the period of January 2022 until December 2024. Out of this list the following selection of 20 final theses has been established:

Track	number	selection
Clinical Psychology	45	6
Cognitive Neuroscience	39	3
Drug Development & Neurohealth	45	4
Fundamental Neuroscience	36	2
Neuropsychology	47	5

Rating sequence	number	selection
5,5-6,9 voldoende	4	4
7,0 - 8,4 goed	44	9
8,5 - 10,0 zeer goed	164	7