

ADDITIONAL ASSESSMENT

**BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

FACULTY OF BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

**UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN**

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This report was finalised on 20 January 2017.





# **REPORT ON THE RESEARCH MASTER'S PROGRAMME BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN**

This report takes the NVAO's Assessment Framework for Limited Programme Assessments of Research Master's Programmes (22 November 2011) as a starting point.

## **ADMINISTRATIVE DATA REGARDING THE PROGRAMME**

### **Research Master's programme Behavioural and Social Sciences**

|                               |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Name of the programme:        | Behavioural and Social Sciences   |
| CROHO number:                 | 60654   |
| Level of the programme:       | master's  |
| Orientation of the programme: | academic  |
| Number of credits:            | 120 EC  |
| Specializations or tracks:    | - Social and Organizational Psychology;<br>- Clinical Psychology and Clinical Neuropsychology;<br>- Sociology;<br>- Education and Development;<br>- Psychometrics and Statistics. |
| Location(s):                  | Groningen   |
| Mode(s) of study:             | full time   |
| Language of instruction:      | English   |
| Expiration of accreditation:  | 30 July 2017  |

The meeting of the assessment panel Behavioural and Social Sciences took place on 15 November 2016.

## **ADMINISTRATIVE DATA REGARDING THE INSTITUTION**

|  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
| Name of the institution:                           | University of Groningen     |
| Status of the institution:                         | publicly funded institution |
| Result institutional quality assurance assessment: | positive                    |

## **COMPOSITION OF THE ASSESSMENT PANEL**

The NVAO has approved the composition of the panel on 22 September 2016. The panel that assessed the research master's programme Behavioural and Social Sciences consisted of:

- Prof. Jozien Bensing (chair), emeritus professor of clinical and health psychology at Utrecht University and honorary research fellow communications and health psychology at NIVEL (*Nederlands Instituut voor Onderzoek van de Gezondheidszorg*), the Netherlands;
- Prof. Naomi Ellemers, distinguished university professor at Utrecht University, the Netherlands;
- Prof. Lieven Verschaffel, professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Leuven, Belgium;
- Ruud Tacken BSc, student of the research master's programme Social and Behavioral Sciences at Tilburg University, the Netherlands.

The panel was supported by Dr Floor Meijer, who acted as secretary.

Appendix 1 contains the curricula vitae of the panel members.



## CAUSE FOR THE ADDITIONAL ASSESSMENT

The research master's ('RMSc') programme Behavioural and Social Sciences was assessed in 2014/2015 by an assessment panel chaired by professor Jozien Bensing. After evaluating all written materials and conducting interviews with representatives of the programme on 7 November 2014, the panel presented its advice on 27 January 2015. In its report the panel concluded that the programme did not comply with the criteria for standard 2 (teaching-learning environment) and standard 3 (assessment and achieved learning outcomes) of the applicable assessment framework (the NVAO's Assessment Framework for Limited Programme Assessments of Research Master's Programmes, dated 22 November 2011). The panel assessed both standards as unsatisfactory. In accordance with the NVAO's decision rules it concluded that the programme did not (yet) meet the criteria for reaccreditation.

The unsatisfactory assessment of standard 2 was based primarily on a lack of integration and commonality in the teaching-learning environment. With its five largely monodisciplinary specialisations and limited common core, the programme did not live up to its claim of interdisciplinarity. Furthermore, the number of students in some tracks was critically low and the panel found the practice of lateral entry (*zij-instroom*) of regular master's ('MSc') students into the programme unacceptable, because students received exemptions for courses that they took at the one-year MSc level instead of the RMSc level. With respect to standard 3, which was also assessed as unsatisfactory, the panel concluded that thesis procedures were not always followed and there was insufficient monitoring of whether learning outcomes were achieved. The panel considered some of the grades given to the sample theses to be inflated and the number of *cum laude* graduations remarkably high compared to other RMSc programmes. In short, the panel concluded that the quality assurance of the thesis supervision and evaluation process required further attention.

In response to the assessment report, the programme drew up an improvement plan and presented it to the panel for approval on 7 May 2015. In this plan, the programme reflected on foreseen (and partly realised) remedial measures in response to the observed shortcomings. It proposed the following measures:

- Strengthening of the inter- and multidisciplinary character of the programme;
- Enlargement of the common core of the programme from 20 EC to 35 EC;
- Discontinuation of the possibility of lateral entry;
- Increase of the maximum student number from 27 to 42 students;
- Introduction of an integrated assessment form for the research master theses on which both assessors motivate the grade, which is handed to and discussed with the student;
- Establishment of clearer criteria for the assessment of theses;
- Strengthening of the role of the Board of Examiners. In order to assess thesis quality the Board will analyse samples of theses on a systematic and annual basis;
- More attention to non-academic career possibilities for students.

After receiving the panel's approval, the plan was submitted to the NVAO on 13 May 2015. Based on the positive response of the panel to the improvement plan, the NVAO decided on 31 July 2015 to grant the programme a two-year recovery period and to extend its accreditation until 30 July 2017.



# WORKING METHOD OF THE ASSESSMENT PANEL

## *Preparation*

The panel that was asked to assess the improvement of the programme consisted of three of the five members of the original panel: Prof. Jozien Bensing (chair), Prof. Naomi Ellemers and Prof. Lieven Verschaffel. A new student member, Ruud Tacken BSc, was added to the panel. In accordance with the NVAO guideline, the panel was asked to focus on the standards that were originally assessed as unsatisfactory, standard 2 and 3.

In preparation for the reassessment in the fall of 2016, the programme drew up a brief report ('Research Master's Programme in Behavioural and Social Sciences. Evaluation of the Revision Period', below: 'status report'), which was made available to the panel members on 5 October 2016. In addition to the status report, the panel selected and studied a sample of 15 theses that were completed in 2015-2016, together with the evaluation and grading reports for these theses. The student member of the panel only acted as second reader. All panel members sent their feedback on the status report and sample theses to the panel and secretary.

In accordance with the NVAO guidelines for additional assessments, the panel chose a 'proportionate' approach to the reassessment. With the approval of the programme and panel, a remote assessment based on submitted documents was decided upon. On 15 November 2016, the panel discussed its preliminary findings during an internal panel meeting. Throughout the meeting the panel had two telephone conversations with Prof. Roel Bosker, director of the Graduate School of Behavioural and Social Sciences of the University of Groningen, who answered remaining questions. In the days after the meeting, the panel studied some additional information provided at the request of the panel, most notably the report by the Board of Examiners on the quality of the theses completed in 2016.

After the panel reached a conclusion on the improvement that was achieved, the secretary drafted an assessment report. The report was submitted to the panel for approval and afterwards sent to the programme for a check on factual inaccuracies. The panel finalised its report after discussing the programme's comments.

## *Decision rules*

In accordance with the NVAO's Assessment framework for limited programme assessments, the panel used the following definitions for the assessment of both standards under assessment and the programme as a whole.

### **Generic quality**

The quality that can reasonably be expected in an international perspective from a higher education master's programme.

### **Unsatisfactory**

The programme does not meet the current generic quality standards and shows serious shortcomings in several areas.

### **Satisfactory**

The programme meets the current generic quality standards and shows an acceptable level across its entire spectrum.



**Good**

The programme systematically surpasses the current generic quality standard.

**Excellent**

The programme systematically well surpasses the current generic quality standard and is regarded as an international example.



## SUMMARY JUDGEMENT

This report reflects the panel's findings and considerations with regard to the additional assessment of the research master's programme Behavioural and Social Sciences at the University of Groningen. During the initial assessment that took place in 2014/2015, the panel assessed standard 2 and 3 of the NVAO Assessment Framework for Limited Programme Assessments – and as a result the programme as a whole – as unsatisfactory. Following the assessment, the programme was granted a recovery period of two years, in which it had to improve standard 2 and 3 on the basis of an improvement plan that was approved by the NVAO. The current panel maintains the previous – satisfactory – assessment on Standard 1 and limits itself to a (partial) reassessment of standard 2 and 3.

### *Standard 2: teaching-learning environment*

During the initial assessment, the panel identified a number of problems relating to the teaching-learning environment. The panel found that the programme did not live up to its ambition of interdisciplinarity. Rather than an integrated interdisciplinary programme, the RMSc was a collection of five monodisciplinary specialisations, bound together by a limited selection of common core courses (20 EC). Some of the specialisations lacked critical mass and, as a result, group dynamics suffered. Another shortcoming the panel reported was the lateral entry of regular master's graduates, who typically received 55 EC of exemptions for courses that they had completed during their MSc programme. Therefore, they could complete the 2-year RMSc programme in just one (additional) year. According to the panel these lateral entrants achieved a different end level than regular RMSc students.

The panel established that the programme has seriously addressed these issues with a number of remedial measures. Amongst these is the abolition of lateral entry, which has been implemented as proposed in the 2015 revision plan. Other measures have taken a somewhat different shape than had been foreseen in the improvement plan. The programme has adhered to its intention to strengthen the common core of the curriculum (although it was increased to 32.5 EC instead of the proposed 35 EC), but the execution differed from what was announced in the revision plan: rather than the proposed interdisciplinary courses on 'healthy aging' and 'sustainable societies' – two university wide research priorities in which the Faculty is involved – the programme added two more general courses: *Integrating Research Findings across Disciplines* (5 EC) and *Starting the First Paper* (5 EC). The proposal to have students of different specialisations present their work during common theory seminars was also discarded. The programme did increase the number of joint seminars, but student presentations remained limited to the specialisation seminars.

While the panel regrets that the promising curriculum changes that were proposed in the revision plan have not all been implemented according to plan, it does appreciate that the common core of the programme was increased from 20 EC to 32.5 EC, thereby extending the amount of time that students of different specialisations spend together. Formal and informal student meetings and joint workspace have been created to promote further integration, and the specialisations have been aligned. The programme has not had much success in increasing the number of students and spreading students more equally across specialisations, but the panel did note the commitment of the University and the Faculty to stepping up their recruitment activities. Finally, the panel concludes that the programme has not achieved the goal of increasing interdisciplinarity that was defined in the revision plan. In this respect the panel does not want to take up a rigid position, especially since the programme has ceased to advertise itself as 'interdisciplinary'. As long as the intended learning outcomes of the programme reflect the existing practice and students are not given the wrong idea about what the programme is aiming at in terms of inter versus multidisciplinarity, the panel is willing to accept that the programme's current form – with a multidisciplinary core and monodisciplinary specialisations – is most suitable to the Faculty's particular structure and culture.



### *Standard 3: assessment and achieved learning outcomes*

In 2014, a sample of twenty theses and the corresponding assessment forms revealed issues with regards to the assessment procedure and the level of grading. The panel established that assessors commonly deviated from the prescribed assessment practice: many assessment forms did not provide evidence for two separate assessors and assessments. Often, grades were not substantiated by qualitative comments. While all of the sample theses met the minimum quality standards for an RMsC thesis, the panel found that the grades given by the original assessors were often (too) high, mainly because the programme used regular MSc students – and not RMsC students – as a reference group. As a result, the proportion of students that graduated with honours was very high compared to other RMsC programmes. One of the panel's urgent recommendations was to increase the role of the Board of Examiners in critically safeguarding the achieved end level of the programme and its graduates.

During the additional assessment the panel studied a sample of 15 recently completed theses. As before, the panel found that the general level of these theses was appropriate for a research master's programme. Nevertheless, some of the grades given by the original assessors were still considered (too) high. Statistical information provided by the programme confirmed that the average thesis grade for the 2014-2016 cohort was almost at the same level as before, while the proportion of *cum laude* and *summa cum laude* graduations was even higher than in previous years.

The panel was pleased to learn that the assessment procedure has been revised: both assessors are now required to independently fill out a form, after which they should discuss their findings and come up with an integrated assessment that is presented to the student. This new procedure is more transparent than before and the assessment form itself has also improved. However, in the sample of theses examined not all supervisors fully complied with the new procedure. The panel established that a substantial number of the forms were not filled out correctly and/or completely. An important remedial measure that was seemingly successful is the strengthening of the role of the Board of Examiners. Over the past two years the Board has monitored the achieved end level by examining a sample of completed theses, and reported about this. Its conclusions with regard to the (grading of) theses are very similar to those of the panel. The panel would like to invite the Board to formulate more concrete recommendations about how current practices can be improved.

The panel concludes that repairing the abovementioned defects is still work in progress. The manifest improvement of the thesis procedure and the recent efforts of the Board of Examiners, however, indicate that the programme is aware of the problems with regards to (the procedure for) thesis assessment and is committed to resolving them. The panel assesses standard 3 as satisfactory, but adds the urgent recommendation that those responsible for the programme carefully, critically and systematically follow up on the conclusions and future recommendations of the Board of Examiners. Specifically, the panel advises the next assessment panel to critically evaluate progress in this respect.

The panel assesses the standards from the *Assessment framework for limited programme assessments* in the following way:

#### *Research Master's programme Social and Behavioural Studies*

|   |              |
|---|--------------|
| Standard 1: Intended learning outcomes                | satisfactory |
| Standard 2: Teaching-learning environment             | satisfactory |
| Standard 3: Assessment and achieved learning outcomes | satisfactory |
| General conclusion                                    | satisfactory |

The chair and the secretary of the panel hereby declare that all panel members have studied this report and that they agree with the judgements laid down in the report. They confirm that the assessment has been conducted in accordance with the demands relating to independence.

Date: 20 January 2017



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Prof. Jozien Bensing



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Dr Floor Meijer





# DESCRIPTION OF THE STANDARDS FROM THE ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK FOR LIMITED PROGRAMME ASSESSMENTS

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

The curriculum, staff and programme-specific services and facilities enable the incoming students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

### **Explanation:**

The contents and structure of the curriculum enable the students admitted to achieve the intended learning outcomes. The quality of the staff and of the programme-specific services and facilities is essential to that end. Curriculum, staff, services and facilities constitute a coherent teaching-learning environment for the students.

## **Findings and considerations 2014**

During the initial assessment, the panel concluded that the programme fell short in a number of aspects relating to the teaching-learning environment. In a general sense, the programme appeared to lack unity. Although the programme was advertised as 'interdisciplinary' in brochures, websites and internal documents, this interdisciplinarity did not come across from the curriculum or the sample of theses that the panel studied.

The programme consisted of five separate, more or less independent specialisations (Social and Organizational Psychology; Clinical Psychology and Clinical Neuropsychology; Sociology; Education and Development; Psychometrics and Statistics) offered by as many different research groups. The common core of the 120 EC curriculum was limited to 20 EC of introductory and statistics courses. Within the disciplinary specialisation, students were given a considerable degree of freedom to compose their own study path out of elective courses. This meant that study paths of individual research master's students diverged to a large extent and there was very little opportunity for 'cohort building'.

An additional problem, related to the fragmented character of the programme, was that a number of the specialisations lacked critical mass, which meant that group dynamics suffered. A final issue was the lateral entry (*zij-instroom*) of graduates of one-year MSc programmes into the research master's programme. Typically, the Board of Examiners granted these students 55 EC exemptions for courses they had completed at the regular MSc level. According to the panel this exemptions policy was unacceptable because it led to a different end level for different groups of students.

## **Findings and considerations 2016**

The panel was generally pleased with the recovery measures that were described in the revision plan (2015). After studying the status report (2016), it established that a number of these measures have indeed been implemented as planned, whereas others have only been partially effected.

In the spring of 2015, the programme abolished the option of lateral entry, thereby obliging all students to complete the full 2-year programme. A one-year transition period was applied for MSc students who had previously been informed of the possibility of lateral entry into the RMSc programme, but these students were subjected to a strict exemptions policy. Exemptions were granted for 35 to 40 EC so that students now needed to compensate far more than the 5 EC that was required in the past. The panel is content that this measure has effectively ended the practice of different end levels for different groups of students.

The programme has also committed itself to the integration of the curriculum by increasing the common core from 20 EC to 32.5 EC (instead of the originally proposed 35 EC) and by decreasing



the individual study paths from 65 to 45 EC. Two new courses of 5 ECTS each and a higher number of compulsory, common theory seminars (8) and research methods & statistics seminars (10) account for the extension of the core curriculum. In addition, the set-up of the five specialisations was realigned and the number of electives to choose from within the specialisations was reduced, which is a positive development.

During its internal meeting the panel discussed the effected curriculum changes at length. It noted that, with regard to the two new common courses, the programme deviated from its original plan to introduce two interdisciplinary courses of 5 EC each that would capitalise on two university-wide research priorities: 'healthy aging' and 'sustainable societies'. Instead, the programme added two courses with a seemingly less thematic and interdisciplinary profile: *Integrating Research Findings across Disciplines* (5 EC) and *Starting the First Paper* (5 EC). The panel discussed the reason for this change of plans with the director of the Graduate School. He indicated that, at this point, the research involvement of the Faculty's staff in the said priority areas is not yet established enough to develop courses on these issues. With respect to the two replacement courses, he opposed the panel's impression that these are neither inter- or multidisciplinary nor based on actual content. An important purpose of both courses is for students from different disciplinary backgrounds to learn from one another. Even so, the panel regrets that the courses on healthy aging and sustainable societies have not come about, as these multi-faceted topics would have been very suitable for an interdisciplinary approach. It insists that the programme should consider introducing such courses once the Faculty's contribution to the two strategic research priorities has matured.

The panel also established that the programme abandoned its stated intention to have students present their own research twice during a total of 20 *common* theory seminars due to objections of a practical nature. Because of the large number of students, 20 common theory seminars would not have been sufficient to accommodate both student presentations and presentations by staff members. Instead, students now present their work during 12 *specialisation-specific* theory seminars. Regrettably, this means that students miss out on the opportunity to receive and give feedback from/to students of different specialisations. Still, the higher number of common seminars – now 18, whereas before there were only 5 – means that students of different specialisations get considerably more opportunities to interact with one another, which is a significant improvement. Another observation with regard to the seminars is that students currently receive 2.5 EC for a total of 30 seminars (18 common seminars and 12 specialisation specific seminars), whereas before this was 5 EC for a total of 25 seminars. The panel wonders whether the current number of credits is compatible with the actual study load and feels that this should be carefully monitored.

The panel notes that integration between specialisations was also promoted by organising and supporting student meetings, both formal and informal. In its status report the programme refers to an extensive social events calendar that enables students from different specialisations to get to know, and interact with, each other. To facilitate joint projects and group work, workspace is reserved for students during certain time slots.

A final measure that was proposed in the revision plan to stimulate group dynamics was to increase the maximum number of students from 27 to 42. The programme acknowledges that the effect of this measure has – so far – been rather limited. The 2015 cohort (29 students) was larger than the average cohort size of previous years (22 students), but in 2016 the number of students fell back (to 24 students). Moreover, the distribution of students across specialisations did not become more balanced. To stimulate further growth the programme has intensified its recruitment activities, which is in line with a university-wide strategic priority to increase enrolment in master's and research master's programmes. The panel hopes that these efforts will bear fruit in the coming years.

While it is regrettable that not all remedial measures have been implemented according to plan, it is not insuperable that changes were made to the revision plan. The overall impression of the panel

is that the unity of the programme has been strengthened, even though the aim to present a truly interdisciplinary programme has been abandoned. Again, this does not have to be problematic. As long as students are not led to develop inappropriate expectations about the programme's nature – as was previously the case – the panel is willing to accept that a collection of monodisciplinary specialisations under an umbrella of common multidisciplinary courses may serve the Faculty's purpose better than a fully integrated interdisciplinary programme. In conclusion, the panel established that the programme has made sufficient efforts to improve the teaching-learning environment in the planned direction, but also insists that the work is not yet complete. It invites the programme to continue to make improvements in years to come.

### **Conclusion**

The panel assesses Standard 2 as 'satisfactory'.

#### **Standard 3: Assessment and achieved learning outcomes**

The programme has an adequate assessment system in place and demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.

##### **Explanation:**

The level achieved is demonstrated by interim and final tests, final projects and the performance of graduates in actual practice or in post-graduate programmes. The tests and assessments are valid, reliable and transparent to the students.

### **Findings and considerations 2014**

During the initial assessment of 2014/2015 the panel established that (the procedures for) thesis assessment required improvement. After studying a sample of 20 recently completed theses, the panel concluded that the grades awarded to these theses were high and in some cases too high. Some of the theses showed serious methodological deficiencies and a number of theses did not surpass the regular 1-year MSc-level. The tendency towards awarding high grades resulted in a high percentage of students graduating with honours (*cum laude* or *summa cum laude*). Like the previous panel (2009), which had also questioned the high proportion of *cum laudes*, the 2014 panel recommended changing the grading policy. Instead of taking students from regular MSc programmes as a reference group – as was the prevailing practice – the programme should compare the results of its students with those of other research master's programmes. The expectation was that this would lead to a (substantially) lower level of *cum laude* graduations.

The thesis assessment forms for the sample theses also revealed a discrepancy between formal requirements and actual assessment practice: while the thesis procedure called for two assessors – the direct supervisor and an independent second reader – many forms did not provide evidence for two separate assessors and assessments. Qualitative comments were largely missing, making it difficult to validate the grades. Furthermore, the assessment forms allowed for compensation of a low partial score for methods and reflection by higher scores for other aspects. This meant that (crucial) parts of the thesis could show serious defects without necessarily leading to a low overall grade. To remedy these issues, the panel strongly recommended to improve the internal consistency and transparency of the grading, and to make the independent role of the co-assessor more visible. The panel advised a more proactive role of the Board of Examiners in safeguarding the quality of the theses and the thesis process. With respect to future career options for graduates, the panel remarked that the programme placed great emphasis on academic careers. It recommended to also pay attention to non-academic career paths.

Overall, the panel concluded that, while graduates of the programme did achieve the intended learning outcomes, the programme failed to safeguard the appropriate end level.



## **Findings and considerations 2016**

In response to the panel's critical comments on the (procedure for the) assessment of theses the programme has taken several measures. Since the 2014 assessment, the thesis form was adjusted several times. The current form includes the names of both assessors, their role in the RMSc project, and their signatures. An appendix to the form also lists the criteria for assigning a grade (e.g. a final grade of 8 is justified when sub-aspects are predominantly awarded 4's on a 5-point scale) and the learning outcomes that should be achieved with the thesis. Assessors are now formally required to submit qualitative comments to support the grade, and the current form offers more space for such comments. The new procedure states that both assessors have to independently fill out the assessment form, after which they discuss their assessments and decide upon the final grade. The outcome of this discussion is reflected in an integrated assessment form that is handed to the student. In case the two assessors cannot reach an agreement, a third assessor is involved.

The panel feels that these measures are a very good response to the procedural problems it identified during the initial review. It does urge the programme to provide even stricter guidance to supervisors with regards to the weighing of partial scores. At the moment it is possible to award a relatively high final grade (8) even when essential parts of the thesis (methodology, reflection) score lower than a 4 on the 5-point assessment scale. The committee also feels that the programme should consider replacing the current 5-point assessment scale by a 10-point scale, as this would increase the opportunity for differentiation.

While the new procedure looks generally effective on paper, the panel concludes that practice is, as yet, fickle. The assessment forms for the 15 sample theses that the panel studied demonstrate that many assessors have not yet fully internalised the new procedures. The panel encountered two forms that had not been filled out save for the grade, a form in which the partial scores for different thesis components had not been weighted according to the guideline, an integrated form that was identical to the form of the first assessor, and, finally, an integrated form that merely contained an enumeration of all points made by the first and second assessor – in other words was not integrated at all. In several cases the grades and feedback given by the first and second assessor were identical, which raises questions about the independence of the two assessments. In a general sense, the substantiation of grades by qualitative comments was rather limited.

The panel has discussed the abovementioned issues with the Director of the Graduate School, who conceded that the implementation of the new procedures is still work in progress. A long list of staff members is involved in the supervision and assessment of RMSc theses and it evidently takes longer than expected to get all of them on the same page, despite the communication and implementation strategy that was developed to accompany the introduction of the new procedures (circulation of a newsletter, meetings with staff). Conscious of the fact that procedures are not always followed, the programme management has recently decided that assessment forms will only be processed when correctly filled out. If not, the grade will not be formally registered and the student in question cannot graduate. The programme management is confident that this measure will convince assessors to comply with the new procedure.

The theses that the panel studied all complied with the minimum standard for research master's theses. Like before, the theses were mostly of a monodisciplinary nature and the weaker theses revealed methodological problems (small sample sizes, inadequately phrased hypotheses, lack of critical reflection), but the panel also read some good theses and one that was very good. Although the panel is satisfied with the overall thesis quality, it found that grades are still somewhat inflated..The self-evaluation report acknowledges that the average thesis grade of students from cohort 2014-2016 (8.1) is similar to that of students from previous cohorts (8.0-8.3). The proportion of *cum laude* and *summa cum laude* graduations remains substantial: 57% for cohort 2013-2015 and 67% for cohort 2014-2016, although the latter percentage is expected to decrease somewhat as not all students of this cohort had graduated at the time of the additional assessment and those who finish late are not likely to be the best students of the cohort. To the panel, the



persisting practice of high grades and *cum laudes* suggests that continued attention to the possibility of inflated grading is recommended.

In response to a recommendation by the previous panel, the programme now devotes more attention to non-academic career possibilities for students, for example by providing an overview on Blackboard of jobs that alumni accepted right after graduation, by forwarding vacancies to students and by organising a 'meet our RMsC alumni day'. The panel is pleased with the improvements in this respect.

In light of its findings on the assessment of theses, the panel took a keen interest in the conclusions of the Board of Examiners (BoE) with regard to the theses completed in 2015 and – especially – 2016. In both years, the BoE has studied a sample of RMsC theses and reported on its findings. The 2016 report, which was only made available after the panel had met, supports many of the panel's conclusions on the incorrect use of thesis assessment forms, the level of grading and the remarkably high percentage of *cum laude* graduations. After assessing four (out of a total of 13) theses, the BoE concluded that three of the four theses 'were considered to be eligible for a lower grade than the grade that was actually awarded to them by the supervisor and second assessor'. While the BoE awarded these theses a pass grade, which signifies that they met the minimum end level, it worries the BoE that they received grades that were up to 1.5 point higher than deemed justifiable. Discrepancies between its own assessments and those of the original supervisors were most notable with regard to the methods and results sections of the theses, which led the BoE to conclude that supervisors and students could be more aware of rules and guidelines with respect to the design of studies and the analyses of results. The BoE further established that in two of the four cases the assessors did not follow the proper assessment procedure.

The panel concluded that there is considerable overlap between its own assessment and that of the Board of Examiners. In terms of quality assurance procedures this is comforting knowledge. In line with the recommendation by the previous panel, the BoE has taken up the task of closely and critically monitoring the thesis quality and making recommendations for improvement. As the panel understood it, the BoE's findings and recommendations will be discussed during the annual meeting of the Graduate School and the Faculty Board in December 2016. According to the panel, this instills sufficient confidence to assess standard 3 as satisfactory – even though the revised thesis procedures are not yet implemented to complete satisfaction and the grades that are awarded to theses are still (too) high. As long as those who are ultimately responsible for the quality of the programme carefully follow up on the conclusions and recommendations of the Board of Examiners, the panel is confident that the programme will be able to continue the upward trend. The panel advises the next assessment panel to critically review the progress made in this respect.

### **Conclusion**

The panel assesses Standard 3 as 'satisfactory'.

## **GENERAL CONCLUSION**

After studying the status report and a sample of 15 recently completed theses, the panel concludes that the programme has made a number of notable improvements since the 2014 assessment. As it stands, the curriculum of the programme is more integrated, procedures are more transparent and the practice of different end levels for different groups of students has efficiently been dealt with. At the same time, it is clear that the recovery process is still in progress. Some of the problems that the original panel encountered, notably the culture of high grades, lack of discipline in using agreed upon evaluation procedures, and ubiquitous *cum laude* graduations, still exist today. This illustrates that it takes time and persistence to turn theory into practice, especially in a programme that is as broad and diverse as the research master's programme in Behavioural and



Social Sciences. In the coming years the programme will have to continue to put a lot of effort into establishing a common quality culture. It will have to set an ambitious quality standard for theses and make sure that all those involved adhere to this standard and comply with the new assessment procedures.

### **Conclusion**

The panel assesses the *research master's programme Behavioural and Social Sciences* as 'satisfactory'.



## **APPENDICES**



## APPENDIX 1: CURRICULA VITAE OF THE MEMBERS OF THE ASSESSMENT PANEL

**Jozien Bensing (chair)** is emeritus Professor of Health Psychology at Utrecht University and the former director of NIVEL (the Netherlands Institute for Health Services Research). As SPINOZA-winner 2006, she is an acknowledged expert in the theory of doctor-patient communication and in the application of psychological knowledge in health care settings. She supervised 30 PhD-theses and wrote over 300 publications. As member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Science (KNAW) she participated in several committees on the quality assessment of the Social Sciences and on scientific integrity. Furthermore she participated in numerous national and international assessment committees. At the moment she is Governance Board member of several public institutions, in particular in the fields of health care and science & innovation.

**Naomi Ellemers** is Distinguished University Professor at Utrecht University, elected member of the Netherlands Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences, corresponding Fellow of the British Academy, and Chair of the board of the Kurt Lewin Institute in the Netherlands. Ellemers has received numerous awards and honors for her work, including the NWO Spinoza award. She serviced the field in different roles, such as President of the European Association of Social Psychology, Associate Editor of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, and editorial committee member of the Annual Review of Psychology. She examines intra-group processes and intergroup relations from a social identity perspective. She uses neuro-cognitive and psycho-physiological research methods in laboratory experiments, does applied work in organizational settings, and combines her findings in translating them to policy recommendations. Her main topics of interest are diversity and social inequality in relation to career development, and power differences and moral norms in relation to ethical decision making.

**Ruud Tacken** is a second year research master's student in Social and Behavioural Sciences at Tilburg University. He completed the Psychology bachelor's programme at Tilburg University and his minor in the research master's programme is in Social Psychology. Amongst the extracurricular activities he undertook, is the Outreach Honors Programme at Tilburg University, a programme that strongly emphasises putting science to practice. As part of this, he did several internships and participated in projects at companies.

**Lieven Verschaffel** is professor in educational sciences at the University of Leuven, Belgium, and head of the Center for Instructional Psychology and Technology. His major research interests are educational psychology and (psychology of) mathematics education. Lieven Verschaffel is a member of the editorial board of numerous international journals, including *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, *Mathematical Thinking and Learning*, *Educational Research Review*, *Learning and Instruction*, *Human Development*, and *Cambridge Journal of Education*. He is Series Editor (together with Wolff-Michael Roth) of the book series New Directions in Mathematics and Science Education published by Sense Publishers. He has published extensively about his research and he has been asked to give plenary talks at several major international conferences in his area of research. For his contribution to (mathematics) education, he has been honored several times. In 2009, he was elected in 2009 as Member of the Royal Academia of Belgium for Sciences and Arts, and, in 2010 as a Member of the Academia Europaea.





## APPENDIX 2: THESES AND DOCUMENTS STUDIED BY THE ASSESSMENT PANEL

The panel has studied theses from students with the following student numbers:

|         |         |         |
|---------|---------|---------|
| 1903799 | 2656957 | 2128101 |
| 2148439 | 2032503 | 2103524 |
| 1739131 | 2054477 | 1887130 |
| 2125846 | 1789244 | 2041189 |
| 1987860 | 1964429 | 2011654 |

In addition, the panel examined the following documents:

- Research Master's thesis assessment 2015-2016 by the Board of Examiners (October 2016);
- Assessment report research master's programme Behavioural and Social Sciences (*Advies van de beoordelingscommissie onderzoeksmasteropleidingen Gedragswetenschappen van de Koninklijke Nederlandse Academie van Wetenschappen ten behoeve van de Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie over de aanvraag tot accreditatie van de onderzoeksgerichte masteropleiding Behavioural and Social Sciences van de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen*), University of Groningen (5 March 2015);
- Research Master's programme in Behavioural and Social Sciences Revision Plan (7 May 2015);
- *NVAO Besluit strekkende tot het verlengen van de geldigheidsduur van het accreditatiebesluit van 27 mei 2009 zoals bedoeld in artikel 5a12a van de Wet op het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek (WHW) van de opleiding wo-onderzoeksmaster Behavioural and Social Sciences van de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen tot en met 30 juli 2017.*

