

Assessment report
Limited Framework Programme Assessment

MSc Business Administration

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Contents of the report

1. Executive summary	2
2. Assessment process	4
3. Programme administrative information	6
4. Findings, considerations and assessments per standard	7
4.1 Standard 1: Intended learning outcomes	7
4.2 Standard 2: Teaching-learning environment	9
4.3 Standard 3: Student assessment	11
4.4 Standard 4: Achieved learning outcomes	13
5. Overview of assessments	14
6. Recommendations	15

1. Executive summary

In this executive summary, the panel presents the main considerations which led to the assessment of the quality of the MSc Business Administration of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The programme was assessed according to the standards of the limited framework, as laid down in the NVAO Assessment framework for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands, as published on 20 December 2016 (Staatscourant nr. 69458).

The programme in Business Administration aims to offer a contemporary perspective on managing strategic issues, human resources, international challenges, change processes and consulting on such issues. The programme trains the future captains of business which have to be knowledgeable, analytical and responsive. The learning outcomes and accompanying framework of reference indicates a clear academic profile with strong attention for the ability of students to systematically apply knowledge and insights to the professional practice. The programme offers five specialisations with a clear outlook on and connection to the professional field. However, the rationale of the specialisations on offer could be strengthened and the programme could provide a clearer definition of the programme's international target audience. The panel established that the programme has a distinguished societal orientation, and recommends the programme to make this more explicit in the description of the programme's profile. The panel assesses standard 1, intended learning outcomes, as satisfactory.

The specialisations consist of different programmes which are similarly structured and through which the students realize the learning outcomes. The content of each profile differs but the programme has various instruments in place to ensure that all students realize these learning outcomes. The panel concludes that all students sufficiently obtain the learning outcomes, but that the extent to which students acquire knowledge in more than one (sub)discipline and are exposed to the professional practice varies. Therefore, the panel recommends that the programme considers to provide stronger coordinating mechanisms in this respect in order to strengthen the profile of the programme as realised by the programme's graduates. The panel is positive about the teaching and learning methods used by the programme which include portfolio and a number of activities through which students get to understand today's professional practice. The panel has established that the programme has an articulate vision on admission which is implemented in practice, and which ensures that students admitted to the programme have sufficient competences to start their studies. The panel met an enthusiastic staff team through which students can gain expert knowledge and skills training. The didactical approach of the programme is rather eclectic and the panel recommends that a coherent didactical approach is defined for the programme, especially taking into account the multidisciplinary character of the programme and the theory – practice relation. Since students live in the area outside of Amsterdam, community building is a challenge, the panel recommends the programme to explore possibilities and opportunities to bring these students together. The panel assesses standard 2, teaching and learning environment, as satisfactory.

The programme's assessment practice is well structured and aimed at safeguarding the quality of assessment. The panel is positive about the approach of the programme in this regard, it strengthens the extent to which assessment is reliable, valid and transparent. The assessment methods used in the programme are varied and functional in terms of demonstration of the particular learning goals. The panel appreciates the further development of the portfolio as a (self-)assessment instrument. The programme uses rubrics for assessment related to the courses, also for assessment methods for which the use of a rubric is less evident, which is appreciated by the panel. The thesis assessment process ensures an independent assessment. The Board of Examiners plays an active role in assuring that the processes of

examination run well. The Board intends to start calibration sessions with staff members involved in thesis grading. The panel recommends that a periodical review of thesis samples is started. The panel has assessed standard 3, assessment, as good.

The panel studied eight theses and has established that graduates of the programme demonstrate to have obtained the programme's learning outcomes. The panel compliments the programme for the topics discussed by students, which connect well to the orientation of the programme and its specialisations. The panel has established that graduates are successful on the job market. The panel assesses standard 4, achieved learning outcomes, as satisfactory.

The panel that conducted the assessment of the Master programme in Business Administration of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam assesses this programme to meet the standards of the limited framework, as laid down in the NVAO Assessment framework for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands, judging the programme to be satisfactory. Therefore, the panel recommends NVAO to accredit this programme.

Rotterdam, 11 April 2019

Dr. Cees Terlouw
(panel chair)

Jetse Siebenga MSc.
(panel secretary)

2. Assessment process

The evaluation agency Certiked VBI received the request by Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam to support the limited framework programme assessment process for the Master Business Administration. The objective of the programme assessment process was to assess whether the programme would conform to the standards of the limited framework, as laid down in the NVAO Assessment framework for the higher education accreditation system of the Netherlands, published on 20 December 2016 (Staatscourant nr. 69458).

The management of the programmes in the assessment cluster Business Administration convened to discuss the composition of the assessment panel and to draft the list of candidates.

Having conferred with management of the programme, Certiked invited candidate panel members to sit on the assessment panel. The panel members agreed to do so. The panel composition was as follows:

- Dr. Cees Terlouw (panel chair), Emeritus lector Intake and Transition Management Higher Education Saxion University of Applied Sciences;
- Prof. dr. Marc De Ceuster, Full Professor in Finance, Antwerp University;
- Prof. dr. Peter van Baalen, Full Professor in Information Management and Digital Organisation, University of Amsterdam;
- Marijke Speelberg MSc. recently graduated student Master Global Business and Master Sustainability, Erasmus University Rotterdam (student member).

On behalf of Certiked, J.W. Siebenga MSc. served as the secretary in the assessment process. The overall coordination of the assessment cluster Business Management was executed by drs. W. Vercouteren.

All panel members and the secretary confirmed in writing being impartial with regard to the programme to be assessed and observing the rules of confidentiality. Having obtained the authorisation by the University, Certiked requested the approval of NVAO of the proposed panel to conduct the assessment. NVAO have given their approval.

To prepare the assessment process, the process coordinator convened with management of the programme to discuss the outline of the self-assessment report, the subjects to be addressed in this report and the site visit schedule. In addition, the planning of the activities in preparation of the site visit were discussed. In the course of the process preparing for the site visit, programme management and the Certiked process coordinator regularly had contact to fine-tune the process. The activities prior to the site visit have been performed as planned. Programme management approved of the site visit schedule.

Well in advance of the site visit date, the programme management sent the list of final projects of graduates of the programme of the last two complete years. Acting on behalf of the assessment panel, the process coordinator selected 8 final projects from this list. The grade distribution in the selection was ensured to conform to the grade distribution in the list, sent by programme management.

The panel chair and the panel members were sent the self-assessment report of the programme, including appendices. In the self-assessment report, the student chapter was included. In addition, the expert panel members were forwarded a number of final projects of the programme graduates, these final projects being part of the selection made by the process coordinator.

A number of weeks before the site visit date, the assessment panel chair and the process coordinator met to discuss the self-assessment report provided by programme management, the procedures regarding the assessment process and the site visit schedule. In this meeting, the profile of panel chairs of NVAO was discussed as well. The panel chair was informed about the competencies, listed in the profile. Documents pertaining to a number of these competencies were presented to the panel chair. The meeting between the panel chair and the process coordinator served as the briefing for panel chairs, as meant in the NVAO profile of panel chairs.

Prior to the date of the site visit, all panel members sent in their preliminary findings, based on the self-assessment report and the final projects studied, and a number of questions to be put to the programme representatives on the day of the site visit. The panel secretary summarised this information, compiling a list of questions, which served as a starting point for the discussions with the programme representatives during the site visit.

Shortly before the site visit date, the complete panel met to go over the preliminary findings concerning the quality of the programme. During this preliminary meeting, the preliminary findings of the panel members, including those about the final projects were discussed. The procedures to be adopted during the site visit, including the questions to be put to the programme representatives on the basis of the list compiled, were discussed as well.

On 8 January 2019, the panel conducted the site visit on the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam University Campus. The site visit schedule was in accordance with the schedule as planned. In a number of separate sessions, the panel was given the opportunity to meet with Faculty Board representatives, programme management, Examination Board representatives, lecturers and final projects examiners, and students and alumni.

In a closed session at the end of the site visit, the panel considered every one of the findings, weighed the considerations and arrived at conclusions with regard to the quality of the programme. At the end of the site visit, the panel chair presented a broad outline of the considerations and conclusions to programme representatives.

Clearly separated from the process of the programme assessment, the assessment panel members and programme representatives met to conduct the development dialogue, with the objective to discuss future developments of the programme.

The draft report was finalised by the secretary, having taken into account the findings and considerations of the panel. The draft report was sent to the panel members, who studied it and made a number of changes. Thereupon, the secretary edited the final report. This report was presented to programme management to be corrected for factual inaccuracies. Programme management were given two weeks to respond. Having been corrected for these factual inaccuracies, the Certiked bureau sent the report to the University Board to accompany their request for re-accreditation of this programme.

3. Programme administrative information

Name programme in CROHO: M Business Administration
Orientation, level programme: Academic Master
Grade: MSc
Number of credits: 60 EC
Specialisations: Human Resource Management
Management Consulting
Strategy and Organization
International Management
Leadership and Change Management
Location: Amsterdam
Mode of study: Full-time (language of instruction: English)
Registration in CROHO: 60644
Name of institution: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Status of institution: Government-funded University
Institution's quality assurance: Approved

4. Findings, considerations and assessments per standard

4.1 Standard 1: Intended learning outcomes

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

Findings

The programme offers a contemporary perspective on managing strategic issues, human resources, international challenges, change processes and consulting on such issues. The programme aims to train the future captains of business which have to be knowledgeable, analytical and responsive. The programme applies a multidisciplinary perspective to business management. At the core of the programme is the aim to build bridges between research and practice. Future professionals have to have solid theoretical knowledge and state-of-the art research skills and be able to apply these analytically and critically to solve actual business challenges. The programme defined a number of fields within the broad field of Business Administration, in which it aims to educate its students. These fields are Human Resource Management, International Management, Leadership and Change Management, Management Consulting and Strategic Management. Staff members of the programme participate in research groups in Human Resource Management, Financial Management, Strategy, Consultancy, Entrepreneurship, Accounting, Spatial Economics, Management & Organizations and Finance. The programme is comparable to other master programmes in Business Administration. From a comparison with several other programmes in the Netherlands and wider Europe, it becomes clear that the programme is unique in the combination of specialisations it offers.

The programme's intended learning outcomes are based on the university and faculty wide visions stressing the interactionist perspective of Business Administration in the business context, and as such address knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Three roles are distinguished: the academic role, the professional role and the citizen role. Regarding the academic role, the programme aims to teach students academic skills, theoretical knowledge and critical reasoning. Regarding the professional role, the programme aims to train students for their future career by training them in relevant skills such as presenting and collaborative skills. Regarding the role of citizen, students are expected to have developed an academic attitude which is important to their role as a citizen. The programme's learning outcomes are divided in six categories, amongst which is self-awareness, which include that students become self-reflective professionals. The panel observes that the programme has a distinguishing, societal approach.

The intended learning outcomes are related to the Dublin Descriptors. The programme has provided a domain-specific frame of reference which in more detail described the disciplinary knowledge and skills obtained by students. The programme provides an overall narrative for the field of Business Administration as a whole, and allows students to become specialised in one of the subfields of Business Administration. Students are expected to develop academic, research and communicative skills at an advanced level and be able to apply these systematically to the professional sphere.

The programme has renewed its relation to practice. Instead of discussing the programme with an advisory council with professional field representatives as members, the programme explores a more fluid structure for consulting the professional field about the learning outcomes and content of the programme. This structure involves annual workshops with a thematic approach for which different sectors and types

of representatives can be invited. The programme has ample connections to companies in different sectors and on different levels.

Considerations

The panel concludes that the intended learning outcomes have an academic orientation, but also include an orientation towards the professional practice. The academic component as well as the professional component reflect a master's level. The panel finds a good balance between the academic and professional component, and noticed that this is an important reason for students to choose for the programme. The programme is fed by research groups in relevant fields, allowing the programme to bring these into the programme and its learning outcomes. The programme in addition has ample connections to the professional field which feed the programme's awareness on developments in the job markets relevant to its five specializations. The panel observes that the specializations connect to specific job markets.

The panel concludes that through its specializations, the programme has a rather specialized character. The specializations fit within the broad domain of Business Administration, but the panel sees room for improvement in the articulation of the justification of the programme and the specialisations within the programme. The societal orientation of the programme is useful in this regard, it has not become clear from the presented general vision on the programme. Therefore, the panel recommends to formulate the societal orientation of the programme more explicit. In addition to this, the panel also recommends the programme to clearly define its (international) target audience.

The panel is highly appreciative of the systematic approach with regard to the structure of the learning outcomes and the roles distinguished in the learning outcomes. The committee is positive about the extent to which the learning outcomes address self-awareness, since this allows graduates of the programme to consciously look for career opportunities that match their personal qualities.

Assessment of this standard

These considerations have led the assessment panel to assess standard 1, Intended learning outcomes, to be satisfactory.

4.2 Standard 2: Teaching-learning environment

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

Findings

The programme takes a holistic approach towards incoming students which amongst others implies that the programme does not apply a cut-off score. Students must have a solid academic basis, for example in (international) Business Administration, Psychology, Sociology, Economics or other related disciplines. The programme looks for motivated and ambitious students. Prior relevant work experience and experience with volunteering or other citizenship behaviour are considered as a potential strength. Applicants need to submit a motivation letter, a CV, a sample of their bachelor thesis, and an overview of their bachelor grades. International students also give proof of their competency in the English language. Of about 600 applicants on an annual basis, the programme admits around 75%. Admitted students with deficiencies are made aware of these and have to recuperate these. Dependent on the deficiency, students have to take a premaster programme (used for students with a bachelor degree from a University of Applied Science), or have to follow specific courses, online courses, or are required to prepare themselves by self-study.

The courses of the programme are structured per specialisation (Human Resource Management, International Management, Leadership and Change Management, Management Consulting, Strategy and Organization). The self-evaluation report describes for each specialisation a narrative and the pillars on which the specialisation is built. These narratives and pillars are used as guiding principles to ensure that each specialisation programme has a clear and unique identity, and as such form the foundation for the cohesiveness of the programmes. The programme ensures that all learning outcomes of the programme are addressed in the specialisation programmes and provides a detailed overview of the relation between courses and learning outcomes in the assessment plan.

The specialisation programmes have a similar structure. Courses are divided over six periods, divided over three periods in each semester. The first period starts with two mandatory courses. In the second and third period students can choose to either take three courses in their own specialisation or take two courses in their own specialisation and one course in another specialisation, in order to broaden their outlook. In the second semester, starting in period four, students commence to work on their master's thesis and take the course Research in Business Administration. In this course, students get a broad introduction in both quantitative and qualitative research methods, after which they choose to use either of them for their thesis. In the fifth period they choose to do an internship or take an interdisciplinary elective while continuing their thesis, which they finalize in the sixth period.

All specialisation programmes provide students with academic and research skills. The focus in the first semester is mainly on content. From the third period onwards, the focus shifts to bridging theory and practice. In the second semester, students start coaching conversations with their supervisors, and have to reflect on their learning goals and long-term development as professionals. Students reflect on the development of professional and academic competencies in a portfolio. This portfolio serves to bind all learning activities and experiences together in a comprehensive document. Students are encouraged and supported to develop a document, video pitch or overview of successes which they will be able to actually use for job applications after graduating from the programme.

Throughout the programme all students are exposed to the professional practice. To this end, the programme has various means in place. Some courses have their first class at a company and integrate the main assignment with important topics of the company and in other courses real-life practical cases and guest lectures are used. All specialisation programmes make use of group assignments and presentations, ensuring that all students are facilitated in the development of collaboration and communication skills.

Staff members of the programme participate in research which is of relevance to the programme. 84% of the staff members have obtained a PhD. Staff members without a PhD are almost all PhD-candidates. The percentage of staff members with a University Teaching Qualification (UTQ) is 68%, staff members who have not obtained their UTQ are in the process of obtaining one. Another 3% of the staff members have obtained their Senior University Teaching Qualification (SUTQ). The programme management regularly meets with the course coordinators to evaluate the courses and discuss the quality of the programme and the courses.

Considerations

The programme has an articulated vision on the admission of students, the panel has established that this vision is satisfactorily implemented in the policy and practices of the programme. The panel is positive about the coherence of the programme and is especially positive about the fourth-block course in methodology, which is in terms of EC's is rather small, but structured and delivered in such a way that students with different backgrounds can reach an adequate and high level.

All intended learning outcomes are translated into learning objectives of the courses. Since the programme for each individual student depends on his or her choices, the degree to which all students obtain the learning outcomes varies. Students could for example avoid being introduced to more than one discipline or decide to take courses in which the exposure to the professional field is relatively high or low. The panel has established that both elements are sufficiently present throughout the programmes' compulsory courses, but recommends the programme to consider to provide more coordination to both elements across the programme courses and in particular recommends to set margins to the extent to which students have to get acquainted with several disciplines (multidisciplinary).

The panel is positive about the approach of the programme towards the development of reflective and professional skills but has observed that the programme's didactical approach is rather eclectic. The in the self-evaluation report described four didactical hallmarks are, as such, not all didactical. Therefore the panel recommends to define a coherent didactical approach, taking into account the multidisciplinary of Business Administration and the theory – practice relation. Further, the extent to which the students feel that they are part of a community could improve as well. The panel recommends the programme therefore to explore opportunities and possibilities to build a stronger student community. The panel met a very enthusiastic team of highly competent staff members. The panel concludes that the programme sufficiently ensures that all staff members involved in the programme provide the quality which can be expected of academic teachers.

Assessment of this standard

These considerations have led the assessment panel to assess standard 2, Teaching-learning environment, to be satisfactory.

4.3 Standard 3: Student assessment

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

Findings

The assessment policies are described in the University's manual on quality assurance. The examination policies have been developed on the basis of this manual. The programme uses an assessment plan in which the connection between the intended learning outcomes and the assessment thereof in the various courses is specified for the various core elements of each course. The assessment plan further provides an overview of the assessment methods used in each course. The programme uses a variety of assessment methods, such as open exams, group assignments, research projects, computer exams, business games and presentations. In addition, the programme recently started to work with a portfolio, which is considered a pilot project. In almost all courses, more than one assessment method is used. For all courses a test blueprint is available, as well as a model answer or assessment criteria. Per course, an assessment file is assembled, containing all relevant documents regarding the assessment of the course. Assessment criteria are provided to students in course manuals and students have the right to be able to practise their skills and knowledge in at least one representative mock exam. The panel observed that rubrics have been developed for a range of assessment methods.

There are several mechanisms in place to safeguard the quality of assessment for the programme as a whole and for the individual courses. In order to structure their courses and the assessment of the courses within the programme, staff members are provided a digital tool, the 'Academic Course Support'. The quality assurance process involves an evaluation by the course coordinator and by the students. Furthermore, the construction of exams is guided by the four-eye principle. The course coordinator has the final responsibility on the quality of assessment. With regard to the assessment of group work, the programme ensures that the weight of group assignments is not more than 50% of the final mark for each course. Students are positive about how the programme assesses group assignments.

The thesis is assessed by the supervisor and a second assessor. The thesis assessment form contains a specification of five levels of competence, for each criterion that is assessed. The staff members independently fill out this form, and decide afterwards together on the grade for the thesis. In the case of strong disagreement, the thesis coordinator of the department is informed about both assessments. Next, the thesis coordinator decides on the grade. The average grade awarded to theses in 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 for the different specialisations lies between a 7.1 and a 7.8. The panel agrees with the grades given to the theses it reviewed. It has observed that the comments and feedback to students on the assessment form is in some cases elaborate and in other cases minimal.

The Examination Board is responsible for the process of assessment. It performs audits on the quality of the process and the outcomes thereof. These audits take a thematic approach and concern for example the validity and reliability of the multiple-choice exams. The Examination Board has so far not reviewed samples of theses, but has the intention to start calibration sessions among staff members to maintain a similar standard among staff members within and from different research units. The Board intends to start this procedure next academic year.

Considerations

The programme uses a variety of assessment methods which fit with the teaching methods chosen for each course. An example of this is the portfolio, which is used for guiding and assessing students in the aspects that integrate the academic training of students and their development as future professionals. The

panel encourages the programme to further develop the portfolio as an instrument of (self-) assessment. The panel concluded that the relation between the courses' learning goals and the examinations are well-considered and that the programme structurally aligns the learning outcomes and learning goals of the courses. The assessment plan is an adequate instrument to this end.

The panel is impressed by the extent to which the programme implements the use of rubrics, in order to enhance the reliability of testing. The panel has studied a selection of theses and the assessment forms. The panel concludes that the written comments on the assessment form do not always match the scoring of a student's achievement in terms of the rubric. The panel is positive about the programme's intentions to organize calibration sessions with regard to the assessment of the theses. The panel recommends the programme to start reviewing samples of theses on a regular basis, to evaluate if the process of assessing theses results in a reliable and valid assessment thereof. The panel concludes that the programme has a clear and strong approach towards safeguarding the quality of assessment. The panel appreciates this approach and the roles fulfilled in it by the several institutional bodies.

Assessment of this standard

The considerations have led the assessment panel to assess standard 3, Student assessment, to be good.

4.4 Standard 4: Achieved learning outcomes

The programme demonstrates that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.

Findings

The panel has reviewed eight theses and is positive about the demonstration of the learning outcomes by the students. Students often write their thesis in collaboration with a company and work on real-world problems. Theses cover a wide range of topics, reflecting the various specialisations of the programme. Although students do discuss practical, real-life topics, the panel had expected the extent to which they reflect in their thesis on the implications of the research for professional practice (for example in terms of recommendations for the professional field) to be stronger.

Most graduates of the programme found a job within six months after graduation. For the Human Resource Management Specialisation, this figure is 90%, for Management Consulting this figure is 100%, and for the Strategy and Organisation Specialisation this figure is 87%. A number of graduates was already employed before graduating. The International Management Specialisation and Leadership and Change Management Specialisation are relatively new and there are no figures available on the alumni of these specializations, but from an informal inquiry among recent graduates, the programme has the expectation that figures will be similar to those of the other specialisations. Students find employment in a range of sectors, among which are consultancy firms, banks, retailers, wholesalers and accountancy firms.

Considerations

The theses display academic quality at a master's level. Students use various research methods, both qualitative as well as quantitative. The panel concludes that the theses connect well to the learning outcomes of the programme but had expected a stronger application of knowledge and insights on the professional practice. Nevertheless, the orientation on the professional practice which characterises the programme is clearly present in other products delivered by the students, such as the portfolio. The panel compliments the programme for the topics students discuss in their thesis, which reflect the character of the programme's specialisations. In addition, the panel compliments the programme for the success that graduates have at the job market.

Assessment of this standard

The considerations have led the assessment panel to assess standard 4, Achieved learning outcomes, to be satisfactory.

5. Overview of assessments

Standard	Assessment
Standard 1. Intended learning outcomes	Satisfactory
Standard 2: Teaching-learning environment	Satisfactory
Standard 3: Student assessment	Good
Standard 4: Achieved learning outcomes	Satisfactory
Programme	Satisfactory

6. Recommendations

In this report, the panel listed a number of recommendations. For the sake of clarity, these have been brought together below. The panel recommends:

- To improve the articulation of the justification of the programme. The societal orientation of the programme is useful in this regard but does not become clear from the presented general vision on the programme. Therefore the panel recommends to formulate the societal orientation of the programme more explicit, and with that also to strengthen this societal orientation;
- to clearly define its (international) target audience.
- to establish the margins on the extent to which students have to get acquainted with several disciplines (multidisciplinarity) and are confronted with the professional practice (relation theory – practice);
- to define a coherent didactical approach especially taking into account the multidisciplinarity of the programme and the theory – practice relation;
- to look for possibilities to strengthen the student community;
- to start periodical reviews of samples of theses in order to evaluate if the process of assessing theses results in a reliable and valid assessment;
- to start calibration sessions with staff members involved in thesis grading;
- the further development of the portfolio as a (self-) assessment instrument
- to improve the extent to which graduates apply research-based knowledge acquired in their research to the professional practice in their thesis.