

Protocol for extension of specific HE master's programmes

22 April 2003

Contents

1	Statutory framework	3
2	Assessment frameworks	3
2.1	Research-oriented master's programmes	4
2.2	International comparative law programmes	Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.
2.3	Language & Culture programmes	7
3	Explanatory notes	Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.
3.1	Statutory framework	9
3.2	Research-oriented master's programmes	10
3.3	International comparative law programmes	11
3.4	Language & Culture programmes	11

1 Statutory framework

Under Article 5a. 2 paragraph 4 of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW)¹, the State Secretary has commissioned NVAO to advise on the extension of the statutory course duration of several specific academic higher education master's programmes and the associated entitlements to study grants.

The establishment of the bachelor's-master's system and the introduction of accreditation for higher education programmes have once more raised the question of whether some programmes would require a longer curriculum in order to be able to satisfy the accreditation requirements. In generic terms, the government has chosen to limit the duration of master's programmes to one year (60 ECTS). In addition, the Minister will designate programmes that will have a longer statutory course duration while retaining entitlements to combined study finance. Such programmes will be listed in a regulation as referred to in Article 7.4a, paragraphs 3 and 5 of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act.

In response to the State Secretary's request, NVAO has drafted this protocol and will give priority to the assessment of:

- research-oriented master's programmes;
- international comparative law programmes;
- Language & Culture programmes requiring extraordinary efforts with respect to language acquisition.

The requirements pertaining to research master's programmes, as set down in this protocol, are intended to be incorporated into the reference frameworks. These frameworks will serve as the basis for the assessment of all programmes whose research nature carries a two-year curriculum.

NVAO observes a procedural timeframe of four months. Exceptions will be made for programmes wishing to actually commence in September 2003. For such programmes, NVAO is aiming for a maximum procedural timeframe of three months.

¹ Article 5a.2. Establishment and tasks of the accreditation organisation (...) 4. A Ministerial Order shall set out the other activities to be conducted by the accreditation organisation in relation to the preparation of a system of Bachelor's programmes and Master's programmes in the Netherlands, or the assessment of education programmes other than higher education.

2 Assessment frameworks

The assessment of the extended master's programmes covers various types of programmes. Separate criteria apply for each of these types, and the assessment procedure will differ from one type of programme to the next. For that reason, three frameworks have been drawn up, pertaining to:

- research-oriented master's programmes;
- international comparative law programmes;
- Language & Culture programmes requiring extraordinary efforts with respect to language acquisition.

2.1 Research-oriented master's programmes

Definition

In the opinion of NVAO, a research master's programme should prepare students for:

- positions requiring research competences and experience beyond the level that can be expected on the basis of the usual link with research conducted within academic higher education, and
- positions or educational trajectories in which research is conducted in mono-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary fields of science for the purpose of writing an academic thesis and pursuing a PhD.

Criteria: short term and longer term

In its approach to the assessment, NVAO draws a clear distinction between the short term and the longer term. Currently, none of the research master's programmes are operational as yet, and within the education system of the Netherlands little experience has yet been gained with this type of programme. The curricula of the programmes that can be expected to submit an application currently only exist on paper; consequently, there is no insight as yet into the learning outcomes that will be achieved. For that reason, the assessment envisaged will be based on the substantive design, the entry level, the exit qualifications established, and the academic context of the programme. It is the intention that the achieved results and the manner in which the programmes have proven their worth in the discipline will serve as the basis for the accreditation of the research programmes whose introduction can be expected in a few years' time.

Assessment framework

In the opinion of NVAO, a research master's programme should be based on the following points of departure:

- the intended entry and exit levels of the programme are essential in order to meet national and international quality requirements; and
- the scope of the curriculum is essential in order to meet the exit qualifications; and
- the workload necessarily ensuing from the curriculum and the intended exit qualifications carries 120 ECTS.

These points of departure have been translated into the following criteria with respect to entry and exit levels, the selection, the academic context, and the curriculum of the programme.

Entry level

- The requirements set by the programme with respect to students' entry level must be comparable to the requirements set for admission to a good research programme within the discipline.
- In its admission of students, the programme must enforce, in compliance with Article 7.30b of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act, a selection with respect to demonstrated knowledge and skills on the part of the students to the effect that enrolled students may readily be expected to be able to complete the programme within the course duration set.

Exit qualifications, exit level

- The programme must educate the students to an exit level that, without substantial supplementary education or training, enables graduates to transfer on to a research-oriented position or to a trajectory geared to pursuing a PhD.
- The programme must be completed with a substantial test of research competence, which is deemed of value at the academic level within the discipline concerned.

Academic context

- The programme must be embedded in an academic environment encompassing sufficient research capacity of a verified good level. In addition, the programme staff must command demonstrable experience in the effective training and coaching of newly-qualified researchers. In this respect, students must regularly be exposed to the actual practice of doctoral research.

Curriculum and structure

- A considerable part of the curriculum is structured in such a manner that the students, under the supervision of a staff member, gain experience in conducting research;
- Entry in the second year of the research master's programme is not precluded (following selection).

Information dossier

An institution applying for advice regarding a research master's programme must submit a dossier to NVAO that specifically addresses the aforementioned criteria. In principle, the application and the dossier must be drawn up in the English language. In cases in which English is not functional, considering the specific nature of the discipline, an application may be formulated in Dutch and/or another language. In any event, the institution must provide concise information regarding the following aspects of the programme:

- a description of the curriculum of the programme, the required entry level, and the selection procedure and selection criteria to be enforced;
- a description of the intended attainment targets of the programme and subsequent study routes, if any;
- a description of the academic context demonstrating both the capacity and the level;
- a description of the final project, the manner in which this is realised, and the structure of the supervision provided by the programme in this process;
- a comparative positioning of the programme in a national and international perspective, preferably supported by opinions of independent experts, such as assessment panels.

Cluster of programmes

It is to be expected that some institutions will choose to submit applications for advice regarding research master's programmes offering several research master's trajectories within a single registration on the Central Register of Higher Education Programmes. Such programmes feature a common theoretical and methodical component, dividing into discipline-specific research components later on in the programme. Such clustering presents a problem with respect to the assessment outlined above: the test concerned pertains to specific educational trajectories, each of which must individually meet the requirements set. Clusters comprising research groups whose level is not up to the standard will be assessed negatively in their entirety. For that reason, NVAO emphasises that applications concerning a cluster of research programmes must contain an information dossier for each of the trajectories of which the cluster comprises. In addition, each of these trajectories must lead back to a research group whose level can be clearly demonstrated.

2.2 International comparative law programmes

Definition

The recommendations of the Cohen Committee have already pointed out the option of extending international comparative law programmes. In the opinion of NVAO, the extension of such programmes can only be deemed essential in the event that a programme:

- intends to provide a law programme that carries a fully-fledged social impact, and
- has a particular focus on international comparative law, and
- devotes a considerable part of its curriculum to the study of one or more foreign legal systems in a comparative perspective.

Criteria

In its assessment of applications submitted by international comparative law programmes, NVAO assumes that the necessity of extension must be based on the combination of a full legal programme with a social impact and the acquisition of substantial knowledge in the field of international comparative law. To achieve a social impact, the curriculum in place in a law programme must meet certain requirements. A three-year bachelor's programme and a subsequent one-year master's programme offer limited scope for instruction in international comparative law.

NVAO will primarily focus its assessments on the question of whether the programme, vis-à-vis other law specialisations that also carry a full social impact, demonstrably requires an extension of the curriculum in order to meet (inter)national quality requirements. A reference to the expansion of the bachelor's programme as ground for the extension will not be taken into consideration in this respect.

Information dossier

In the dossier underpinning the request for advice, the institution must provide an overview of the following:

- a description of the curriculum of the programme, demonstrating the ratio between the general law courses and the international comparative law component;
- a description of the attainment targets and the intended social impact of the programme;
- a description of the substantiation of the comparative law component of the programme;

- as far as existing programmes are concerned: how does the new curriculum relate to the old curriculum?
- a substantiation of the necessity of extending the curriculum, preferably supported by opinions from independent experts, for example, assessment panels.

2.3 Language & Culture programmes

Definition

In the opinion of NVAO, programmes only qualify for extension if they comprise a language acquisition component that is comprehensive and time consuming to the extent that it precludes the composition of a fully-fledged academic programme within a three-year bachelor's and one-year master's period. In this respect, it must apply that the extensive language acquisition component precludes the student from attaining the level of knowledge regarding culture and society that is required in order to function at an academic master's level, causing the student to fall short in this respect vis-à-vis graduates from internationally comparable programmes.

Criteria

In order for NVAO to assess an application for extension of the curriculum of Language & Culture programmes, the programmes must, as a minimum, satisfy the following criteria:

- Learning the language requires additional effort because such language is not offered as a subject in secondary school curricula.
- In addition, it must apply that the language acquisition component constitutes an exceptionally large call on the study time, which hampers the acquisition of knowledge of culture and society in a broad sense, and causes the desired academic content of the programme to fall below the level required for accreditation. The language acquisition component can only be considered exceptionally large if:
 - the language (or languages) that is/are taught is/are written in a script that is based on a (or several) highly comprehensive set(s) of characters, and
 - the acquisition of reading skills at an academic master's level requires students to amass familiarity with the script over a consecutive period for a number of years, and
 - the acquisition of oral fluency, reading skills, listening proficiency, and knowledge of culture and society at an academic master's level requires a study stay in the country in which the language is spoken.
- It can be demonstrated conclusively that the current course duration does not permit the scheduling of a language skills and knowledge of culture and society curriculum that meets the requirements for academic master's programmes, and that, as a minimum, equals that of comparable programmes abroad. Such comparison only extends to academic master's programmes that observe comparable standards with respect to the command of the language and the knowledge of culture and society.
- The programme comprises a study stay in the country in which the language is spoken; the scope and nature of this stay are such that the student is sufficiently enabled to acquire language skills, with a view to the attainment targets of the programme.

Information dossier

The dossier provided by the institution when submitting its request for advice to NVAO must comprise the following:

- a description of the programme and the curriculum provided under the bachelor's – master's system;

- a specific description of the language skills component and the proportion of the curriculum focused on culture and society instruction, and a description of the international standards for programmes within this discipline, indicating the extent to which a four-year programme (a three-year bachelor's phase and a one-year master's phase) in the Netherlands would fall short vis-à-vis the level required for an academic master;
- a description of the possibilities for a study stay and language acquisition in the country in which the language is spoken;
- with respect to these programmes, the application and the dossier must, in principle, also be drawn up in the English language. In cases in which English is not functional, considering the specific nature of the discipline, an application may be formulated in Dutch and/or another language;
- opinions from independent experts, for example, assessment panels, demonstrating the necessity of extending the programme.

3 Explanatory notes

3.1 Statutory framework

Upon the introduction of the bachelor's – master's system, a generic course duration of one year (60 ECTS) was assumed for master's programmes. Despite the fact that in many cases, bachelor's programmes were scheduled in a manner that involved an expansion of the curriculum, virtually all existing old-style four-year master's programmes were converted into a three-year bachelor's phase and a one-year master's phase. The conversion of old-style master's programmes into new-style bachelor's / master's programmes did not offer institutions the opportunity for extension of such programmes.

Upon the conversion of the old-style programmes, however, the institutions, encouraged by the recommendations of the Cohen Committee, also instituted master's programmes whose course duration exceeds one year of study and whose workload exceeds 60 ECTS. The institutions are currently free to determine the workload involved in a master's programme. However, students enrolled in such programmes only qualify for combined study finance for the statutory course duration of a master's programme. Granting entitlement to combined study finance for the additional year of the master's programme requires that such programme is designated by the Minister in a regulation as referred to in Article 7.4a, paragraphs three and five of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act.

The State Secretary has commissioned NVAO to advise on the requirements to be satisfied by research master's programmes, and on the necessity of extending the course duration of some specific master's programmes in order to meet national and international quality standards that cannot be attained through a one-year master's programme. When NVAO deems such a necessity conclusively demonstrated, the institution may submit a request to the Minister to include the programme concerned in the aforementioned regulation.

Differentiation in master's programmes

The assessment to be carried out by NVAO within the near future is an element of the bachelor's – master's structure implemented in Dutch higher education. It is aimed at enabling the introduction of extended master's programmes in the short term. In its assessment, NVAO will give priority to three clusters of programmes: the research master's programmes, international comparative law programmes, and several arts programmes. Separate assessment frameworks have been set down for each of these clusters.

The regulation under which NVAO is carrying out this assessment will run until 1 September 2005. Subsequently, the assessment of the required course duration of master's programmes will have been incorporated into the initial accreditation procedure.

3.2 Research-oriented master's programmes

As the institutions are currently still engaged in the substantiation of research master's programmes, an assessment can only be based on ambitions regarding the level and the structure of such programmes. The assessment of the output and level of quality achieved will have to wait until the applications for extension of the accreditation are assessed in a few years' time.

In the opinion of NVAO, a two-year research programme must have a distinct, individual profile; it must prepare for positions requiring research capacity or a trajectory leading to the pursuit of a PhD. We expect a research master's programme designed in such a manner to have a positive impact on the success rates and the quality of PhD trajectories. This may reduce the number of graduates dropping out during the pursuit of a PhD.

The one-year master's programme prepares graduates for a wide range of positions in society; after completion of a one-year master's programme, transferring to a research master's programme following an admissions test is not precluded.

Criteria

NVAO approaches the assessment of the criteria in a manner similar to the initial accreditation procedure. Instead of the general assessment framework, this assessment primarily focuses on subject-specific aspects of the programme. In the formulation of the criteria to be assessed, NVAO has expressly taken account of the current developmental stage of the programmes. Within this restriction, several well-defined conditions have been set in the assessment framework. The Cohen Committee has already indicated that a reference to the expanded bachelor's programme cannot be regarded as a valid argument for extension of the master's programme. It must be clear that the scope offered by extension of the master's programme cannot be realised in any other manner in a four-year curriculum without compromising the level and the accreditability of the programme.

The academic context plays an important part in the assessment of research master's programmes. A "good" level could be indicated by a "good" score as awarded in external assessments. NVAO has intentionally opted for the level of "good", considering the high level of the programme that is desirable from an international perspective. The bar will be raised for the top master's programmes that might be substantiated (5 = excellent).

For the group(s) that are actually involved in the programme(s), the "academic context" must be reviewed in more detail. The deciding factor in this respect is the conclusion of the "peers" whom NVAO will involve in the assessment of the application. The peers will have to arrive at their conclusion on the basis of the information submitted by the institution concerned. This information may comprise, inter alia, external assessment reports, the resumes of the staff involved in the programme, positioning in research schools, or other evidence of a good research quality. In all cases, however, NVAO will only issue a positive advice if the peers award the qualification of "good" to the "academic context" in which the programme is provided.

As a matter of course, the assessment will also need to take account of the individual nature of the discipline concerned. For example, the reference framework required for Dutch Law will differ from that required for International Economics.

The required exit level of the programme and the substantial test of research competence will be assessed on the basis of the standards that are customary in the discipline concerned. The latter may involve the production of a result that is publishable in terms of level, under the student's own name or, as is customary in some disciplines, under co-authorship. The assessment expressly involves an indication of level rather than actual publication with all the associated practical aspects.

Information dossier for research master's programmes

Extension will be assessed on the basis of a dossier to be submitted by the institution to NVAO. First of all, this dossier must provide a clear overview of the programme for which extension of the course duration to 120 ECTS is considered. This overview concerns matters on which information is currently available within the institutions. NVAO will require an English language text for its assessment. For some disciplines, another language may be more functional: for example, an application pertaining to a French literature programme may quite well be formulated in French. In such cases, a Dutch text must also be provided. NVAO aims to minimise the administrative burden involved in this assessment. The information provided in the dossier must be concise and relevant to demonstrating the necessity of extending the programme. Although NVAO will reach its conclusion autonomously, it may append conclusions from independent experts, such as, in particular, the most recent external assessment reports.

3.3 International comparative law programmes

International comparative law is increasingly becoming embedded in legal practice. In all elements of such practice, lawyers have to deal with foreign legal systems. In many cases, the comparative review of legal systems has been incorporated into law programmes. In most cases, the comparative law component of the curriculum can be properly accommodated in the law programme, thus safeguarding the social impact of the programmes – access to professions in the administration of justice or the Bar. The necessity of extension can only be demonstrated if the programme aims to combine a prominent profile in the field of international comparative law to a sufficient number of legal components required for the practice of “robed professions”.

Information dossier for law programmes

As the programmes referred to above will usually involve programmes that are already in place, the application must clearly indicate how the old curriculum will relate to the new, extended curriculum. It will have to demonstrate that the extension has solely served the purpose of safeguarding both the social impact requirements and satisfying quality requirements pertaining to comparative law.

3.4 Language & Culture programmes

With respect to various arts programmes, a course duration of four years is known to be limited vis-à-vis the goal of imparting both sufficient language skills and knowledge of culture and society at a level befitting an academic master. Language acquisition takes up too much space within a four-year curriculum comprising a three-year bachelor's and a one-year master's phase. The purpose served by an academic master's programme in the Arts differs from that served by a language-specific professional programme (such as a translation or interpreting programme). Graduates are deemed to be capable of using their knowledge of the language for taking an academic stance in their consideration of the country of the study. To this end, an introduction to academic research constitutes an

important component of the programme. Many Arts programmes are affected, to a lesser or greater degree, by the limitations of a four-year curriculum. However, for some programmes such limitations are especially serious, considering the nature of the language; currently, it requires a major effort on the part of these programmes to train graduates to an internationally acceptable level. Some only manage by incorporating an extracurricular study stay in the country of the study. In such cases, the necessity of extending the master's programme is clear. NVAO will strictly apply the criteria set out in the framework.

Information dossier for Arts programmes

When drawing up an application for extension of a master's programme in the Arts, it is vitally important to substantiate clearly how the programme relates to leading programmes abroad in terms of scope of the curriculum. In particular, the programmes concerned must warrant a comparison in terms of the ratio between the language acquisition component and the knowledge of culture and society component.

A description of the curriculum must clearly explain how the additional time will be used to achieve a balance between language acquisition and knowledge of culture and society across the entire length of the studies. The independent nature of both the bachelor's programme and the master's programme must remain uncompromised in this respect. Conclusions by independent experts, such as external assessment reports, may be appended if they are relevant and contain a specific explanation or assessment of the substantiation of the necessity of extending the course duration. Programmes may also gather opinions of experts in the field and append these to their application.

As with the other clusters of programmes, the application and the dossier must be drawn up in the English language. In cases in which English is not functional, considering the specific nature of the discipline, an application may be formulated in Dutch and/or another language.