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Vlaamse universiteiten en hogescholen raad

Additional Assessment

Sustainable Development

KU Leuven

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I Background

1. Introduction

The subject of this external assessment was the Master of Science in Sustainable Development at KU Leuven with its two trajectories: (1) Sustainable Territorial Development (STeDe-trajectory), and (2) International Course Program Master of Sustainable Development (ICP-trajectory). An external assessment of this master took place in the autumn of the academic year 2017-2018. This external assessment was organised by VLUHR QA. Each of the three quality standards was evaluated as satisfactory. The panel wrote down its opinions and recommendations about the programme in an assessment report, published on the website of the Flemish Higher Education Council (VLUHR): www.vluhr.be/sustainabledevelopment

At the moment of the external assessment the ICP-trajectory, including its two tracks “Space & Society” and “Ecology”, was running for the first time. Based on the information that was available at that time the panel expressed its confidence about the ICP-trajectory and assessed the quality of it as satisfactory. Therefore, the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) decided not to take a final accreditation decision yet, but extended the accreditation of the Master of Sustainable Development temporarily with one year and asked for an additional assessment of the ICP-trajectory with focus on “the results of testing and examination of students” of standard 3 Outcome Level Achieved.

This report contains the results of the additional assessment carried out by an authoritative, independent and expert panel (see below) and coordinated by the Quality Assurance Unit of the Flemish Higher Education Council (VLUHR QA).

2. Programme involved

Master of Science in Sustainable Development: International Course Programme Master of Sustainable Development (ICP-trajectory), tracks “Space & Society” and “Ecology”

3. Assessment panel

Within the framework of this assessment, a panel was composed of two panel members who were also members of the previous panel, as well as a student member. The composition of the assessment panel Sustainable Development was ratified on March 15 and July 1 2019 by the VLUHR Quality Assurance Board. The NVAO sanctioned the panel composition on June 17, 2019. The assessment panel was subsequently installed by the Quality Assurance Board by its decision of July 4, 2019.

The composition of the panel is as follows:

- **Prof. Rob van der Vaart**, emeritus professor of cultural and regional geography at the Department of Human Geography and Planning, Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University, Netherlands
- **Prof. dr. Katriina Soini**, Senior Researcher, Natural Resources Institute Finland, Adjunct Professor, University of Eastern Finland
- **Dylan Couck**, student master of Laws, Ghent University

Patrick Van den Bosch, Policy Advisor Quality Assurance at the VLUHR Quality Assurance Unit, was the project manager and secretary of the panel.

The short curricula vitae of the panel members can be found in chapter 3.

4. Task

NVAO asked for an additional assessment on a specific aspect of quality standard 3. NVAO clarified to KU Leuven that *'with regard to the criteria for quality standard 3, the validity, reliability and transparency of the assessment' has been sufficiently and positively addressed in the original assessment report* and is therefore not a subject of additional assessment. The additional assessment *'should specifically focus on the results of the assessment and the examination of the students'*.

Furthermore, NVAO suggested to also focus on a specific comment of the panel in the assessment report concerning the career services and career planning in the programme but clarified that *'the employability of graduates or the progression to a follow-up programme' would not be the subject of an additional assessment.*

5. Working method

To assess the results of testing and examination of students of standard 3, the output results of three main courses in the ICP-trajectory were made available by the programme management: (1) the course "Master thesis and professionalization", (2) the course "Sustainable Development Living Lab and Project" and (3) the course "Individual Portfolio in Sustainable Development". These courses cover all the learning outcomes that students need to achieve.

KU Leuven provided the panel with 10 master's theses including the score and the completed assessment forms. Each panel member chose four theses from the list in order to read sufficient master's theses spread over both tracks.

KU Leuven also provided a number of documents with an explanation of the purpose and the working and assessment method for the master's thesis and the other main courses. The master's theses and relevant documents were delivered to the panel on June 14, 2019. The panel received the completed assessment forms on June 28, 2019. The panel was given the opportunity to carefully study the information.

The panel met by videoconference on July 8, 2019 to discuss its findings. During this meeting, the panel also met with representatives of the programme in order to obtain further clarification and contextualisation of the documents provided.

As a final step, the panel has documented its findings and conclusions in this report.

II. Assessment

In order to give an opinion on the results of the assessment and the examination of the students, the panel made an assessment of the three courses, which together comprise all the intended learning outcomes of the programme. The panel found that clear documents had been drawn up for these courses, describing the objectives, working methods and evaluation methods.

The goal of the course '**Master thesis and professionalization**' is to gain relevant professional and academic experience related to sustainable development and, at a later stage, integrate these experiences, knowledge and the collected data in a Master Thesis. Consequently, the internship must be linked to the Master Thesis. This can be done as an external internship or an internal internship where students are integrated in an existing research project of a KU Leuven academic staff member. The final thesis has to reflect the individual research process and results but also has to contribute to the project, programme or institution where the internship was conducted.

The thesis document, including the summary of the internship activities, is evaluated by the supervisor and two readers. The students publicly defend their Master's Thesis during the examination period. During this defence, the readers interview the student on his work. The examiners who are present at the defence, jointly give an examination note for each defence on a session that is presided by the Chairman of the Board of Examination or his delegate. Subsequently, the chair and the president of the examination committee collect all examination results. Four notes are given for the Master's Thesis, one from the supervisor, one from both the readers and one for the presentation during the defence. The relative weight of these four notes is 10:3:3:4.

In order to pass for the Master's Thesis, the student must obtain at least 10/20 from each of the three evaluations: by the supervisor evaluation, the average of the results of the readers together and the defence evaluation. If this is not the case for one of the components, the maximum score will be at most 9/20. The assessment form (called: evaluation roster) for the final document is based on the evaluation policy for the Science Faculty. However, three important evaluation criteria, linked to the specific objectives of this course are added: contribution to the sustainable development field; quality of internship annex and professionalization.

The panel has read a sample of master's theses. These master's theses all comply with the learning outcomes intended by the programme. The master's theses are well-written, have a variety of contents and have a well conducted data collection. In general, the theoretical part of the master's theses is rather concise, but sufficiently present. A larger proportion of the master's thesis is spent on the empirical work.

The panel is informed by the programme management that there is no different grading for the master thesis and the internship. Both are linked and subsequently students receive one final mark for the whole course Master thesis and professionalization.

The marks that were awarded to the master's theses correspond with the marks that the members of the panel would give to the individual master's theses. The panel suggests that the programme management should critically follow the combination of internship and thesis in one report, because in practice the two may deserve different grading, or there may be issues of relevance of an internship for an independent thesis. Until now, there have been no issues.

The panel commends the assessment form that is used to evaluate the course '**Master thesis and professionalization**'. This roster allows to assess multiple aspects of the process, the content, the form, the professionalization, the internship annex and the defence. There is not a set of weights that is given to each of the aspects of the roster in order to avoid a formalistic use of the roster. The final mark has to correspond with the appreciation scale for master's thesis of the KU Leuven Faculty of Science, which is commended by the panel.

The roster leaves insufficient room for additional, qualitative feedback from the individual assessor. However, during its meeting with the programme management, the panel learned that students are invited to discuss the results of the assessment with their supervisor. The panel advises to foresee this space in the roster. It will allow each evaluator to give additional, traceable feedback in case of any disagreements.

The course **Sustainable Development Living Lab and Project** intends to offer students an opportunity to connect their studies and training with relevant research on the field and with the most pressing needs of the Global South. During the living lab students are confronted with real life problems and with key agents of change, including local professors and Global South partners, but also practitioners and policy-makers, development institutions, intergovernmental bodies and representatives of the private sector.

The Living Lab course consists of preparatory seminars (3 ECTS), fieldwork in the Global South (6 ECTS) and reporting (6 ECTS). For their fieldwork, students visit a region in the Global South for roughly two weeks. In the first week they explore the area under the supervision of experts to set the scene and to get acquainted with recent research. In the second week students carry out independent research in groups and present intermediate results at the plenary meetings of the Living Lab. After completing the fieldwork, students write a final report integrating the framing of the problem, the developed methodology, the results of the analysis and the proposed development plan. Finally, students present the final report to their peers and other involved researchers. To evaluate the students' performance in the Living Lab, all separate learning activities are evaluated: the preparatory phase is evaluated based on action plans; the Living Lab is evaluated based on an oral exam and on the students' participation and activity, and the reporting phase is evaluated based on development plans and presentations. The panel finds that evaluation procedure is based on clear criteria. On top of that the panel commends the practical rubrics used by the programme.

The panel examined the students' action plans and development plans and watched some documentaries about the Living Lab. The panel is positive about the innovative and up-to-date approach of this course. The panel read well-constructed action plans that show that students are well prepared to start their fieldwork. The panel makes the same positive comments about the students' development plans.

The panels' meeting with the programme management showed their awareness of some possible pitfalls. For example, two weeks of fieldwork is rather limited to achieve the intended goals, which is also detected by the programme management. Therefore, the programme management wants to establish more sustainable connections with the current and potential locations of the Living Lab. In that way students will be able to build on the work of the cohort before them, and be more connected with the area before doing their fieldwork. The panel commends the programme managements' current view to move the location of the Living Lab every 2 - 3 years instead of every year to enhance the sustainable relationships with the region and to avoid the practical difficulties of an annual move.

Last year, the KU Leuven Education Council awarded the "Sustainable Development Living Lab and Project" as an innovative, research-driven form of education with an impact on sustainable development in the Global South. The Living Lab received the 'Price of the Education council 2018 - 2019'.

The **Individual Portfolio in Sustainable Development** is a course based on the proactive participation and engagement of students in the international academic and policy debate on sustainable development. Students are invited to participate in self-selected lectures, conferences, seminars, workshops and other relevant events on sustainability related themes. These might include initiatives organised at the KU Leuven but also elsewhere in Belgium, Europe and beyond. Students can also join relevant documentary film festivals and other relevant exhibitions to find inspiration for the development of their portfolios.

At the beginning of the course students are requested to formulate their own learning goals and to keep track of their activities in a log. Students keep track of their progress, but also, more crucially reflect in their portfolio on the construction of their future and report their thoughts in a dedicated blog. This learning activity involves feedback moments at the end of each term on the content of individual students' portfolios. The overall learning

goal is that students reach critical judgements in relation to relevant sustainable development issues and, by doing so, they construct a personal viewpoint about the situation of the Global South vis-à-vis the Global North and develop self-reflection on their studies.

The panel examined several student portfolios. The panel commends the learning process of the students that is made visible by the students themselves in their conclusions of their work. In its meeting with the panel, the programme management testified that the guidance and assessment of the portfolios is a valuable but time-consuming investment for the teaching staff.

The panel points at the fact that a score is given on each part of the portfolio as intensive work. Therefore, the panel suggest to re-evaluate the evaluation methods to make them even more efficient. The programme management argues in its meeting with the panel that the students are asking to be scored on every aspect - from an appreciative approach - so that they can also see their own progress and, if desired, ask the teachers for feedback. Next to that, this is done to be able to make a better distinction between students and award their efforts. The rubrics used for assessing students are a good practice.

In the previous assessment report, the panel noticed *'a lack of career services and career planning. This may leave students with a lack of direction at the beginning of the programme and difficulties in finding pertinent, and satisfying employment after graduation. (...) Individual career advice should be provided where appropriate'*.

The panel was informed that the current career services and career planning of the master students are addressed through five main strategies: (1) A workshop "Sustainable Development in practice"; (2) the individual portfolio in Sustainable Development which can be hosted outside the university network, encouraging students to enter into direct contact with the professional field; (3) the internship in which students can opt a more professionally oriented external internship; (4) some general initiatives for all students at university and faculty level and (5) a future alumni network.

The programme management believes that the elaboration of an active alumni community will contribute to the creation of an active and international learning community on sustainability. The alumni network intends to be connected to the one of the Erasmus Mundus STEDE Master, allowing the development of an enlarged network. Through regular targeted email campaigns, they want to acquire insights into the success factors of the career development and employability of the graduates. Furthermore, the alumni network might provide current students with an easily accessible opportunity to enter into direct contact with the professional working field, both for master-related activities as for the development of their own career.

The panel is positive about the steps that are taken by the programme management to follow up on the recommendation of the previous panel. As the first students graduated only this month, it is too soon to see the results of the current policy in the long run.

The panel concludes that based on its thorough examination that the learning outcomes of students for the "Master thesis and professionalization", the "Sustainable Development Living Lab and Project" and the "Individual Portfolio in Sustainable Development" are achieved. As a result, the programme succeeds in achieving all the intended learning outcomes. Subsequently, the panel assesses the results of the assessment and the examination of the students as positive.

III. Curriculum vitae of the members of the assessment panel

Rob van der Vaart was professor of cultural and regional geography at the Department of Human Geography and Planning, Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University. He also occupied a Dedicated Chair for Geographical Education on behalf of the Royal Dutch Geographical Society. From 2008 until 2015 he was Dean of University College Utrecht, the international Liberal Arts and Sciences College within Utrecht University. He was also Vice-Rector for Education and Honours Dean of Utrecht University. As Vice-Rector he represented Utrecht University in the League of European Research Universities and in the Network for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. He co-authored publications in both networks. PhD research under his supervision focused on geographical education, including geography in higher education, and geographical heritage studies. He retired from Utrecht University in 2016 and is now active in a range of advice, teaching, research, and consultation activities internationally. He was the chairman of the previous assessment panel 'Sustainable Development'.

Katriina Soini is a human geographer and sustainability scientist working at the time of the site visit as a Sustainability Science Fellow at the University of Helsinki, and currently as a Senior research scientist at Natural Resources Institute, Luke. Her research has focused broadly on social and cultural aspects of sustainability mostly in the context of rural livelihoods, landscape and biodiversity. Her research is rooted in human geography, sociology and cultural studies seeking to have implications for environmental policy and governance. Recently she has specialized in Sustainability Science research and inter- and transdisciplinary practices. She was the coordinator and teacher of the course Sustainability Science -002, Concepts, Environmental Change and Global Sustainability Master Programme at the Helsinki University in 2017. She has wide international networks as a result of leading a COST Action IS 1007 Investigating Cultural Sustainability (2011-2015), as a partner of two Marie Curie ITN networks (SUSPLACE and RECOMS), and involvement in FP7 and Horizon2020 research projects and proposals. She is the initiator and the series editor of the Routledge Studies in Culture and Sustainable development and an author of 30 peer reviewed articles.

Dylan Couck is a master's student in Law at the Ghent University. He is a student representative in several committees at the university and at the Faculty of Law and Criminology. He is also a Board member of the Flemish Union of Students (VVS). He has considerable relevant experience concerning quality assurance and assessment of education, including his participation as a member in assessment panels.