

## MA Workgroup Profile 2016 - translation

### *Executive Summary*

The Workgroup for Master Education gives the following advices to the Faculty Board:

1. Instead of emphasizing re-structuring the supply on program level, emphasize re-structuring the supply on module level. This will enhance both a good cooperation as well as a fruitful supply of courses. This entails a minimum of students per module (although exceptions on this point can be made).
2. Let the Program Directors (in congruence with the Program Teams and Boards of Studies (OC's)) determine semi-autonomous MA-domains in which cooperating studies, programs, and specializations have the chance to develop a supply that attracts students and simultaneously meets the academic aspirations of professors and students. This also entails that a sufficient amount of hours will be offered to the Program Coordinators and the Program Directors in order to execute their responsibilities accordingly.
3. Development of a clear strategy that intertwines the academic expertise and the general competences offered by the programs. This will enable the Faculty to profile the dropouts, as well as stimulate the cooperation between the programs.
4. Improved management of the student registration, in order to increase the student input, student occupation, and student output of the modules.
5. Investments in effective communication and marketing.
6. Create a time plan for all the involved parties, so there will be enough room for discussion and decision making about the module supply.

### *Introduction*

The MA-program at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Amsterdam is the broadest and most diverse program throughout the Netherlands. Furthermore, it also holds an excellent position on an international level. It is up to the UvA not only to maintain this position, but rather to strengthen it. In order to achieve this strengthened position of the MA-program, the program will need to focus more carefully and consciously on the intertwining of broad academic skills (i.e. "twenty-first century skills). This will be made possible via education focused on the maintenance and development of specialized knowledge already present at our faculty. Expertise can be achieved by intertwining that what is intellectually challenging and interesting in content. By this means, we will be able to provide students with general competences necessary for them to enter the job market, while, simultaneously, the diversity in expertise will be

maintained. For a large part, the strength of the Master Programs at the UvA is determined by the diversity of the supply and the possibilities of this supply for the students.

The best way to go about this, is by re-structuring and broadening the modules supply, with the goal to create and achieve a more attractive set of modules for the students, an improved time-table selection, higher student participation levels per module, and a balance between general competences, professional skills, and specialized knowledge. With these changes to the MA-program, graduates will gain a most optimized relation to the job market, both within and outside of the university. In the exchange of these general and specialized competences, there is a need for studies to develop their own strategic plans.

These suggestions will fit some existing studies and programs better than others: that is something we need to consider. Therefore, if a study, program, or track is unable to improve its desirability – and, as an effect, fails to attract the minimum amount of students required for over a period of e.g. three years – then this study, program, or track can be abolished.

#### *Modules used as indicators of the program's strength*

A lot of discussion has been held on the large amount of programs offered at our university. For that reason this workgroup has examined whether the strength of the programs can be calculated based on quantitative criteria (such as input and occupation) and on qualitative criteria (such as excellence, the strategic position, etc.). Both criteria should be considered in the assessment of the program's sustainability. Besides that, it should be considered that the program supply is highly differentiated. The efficiency of the programs can benefit from this differentiation by stimulating cooperation amongst the many different modules – the successful ones, but also the lesser successful ones. In this scenario, it is important that the modules receive main attention, while the programs will function as the overarching set of the modules with finalized goals and strategic plans.

By aligning the module supply, teachers and studies will be given space in order to shape their own future. They will create and develop new collaborations, which will lead to the development of well-considered and attractive modules. Additionally, teachers will cooperate in shaping and profiling their own programs. The participation of teachers is essential in this process. Therefore, it is important to shape a bottom-up approach in order to stimulate cooperation. Program Teams, teachers, and students are the main participants in this strategy. This will stimulate the restructurings of the program.

#### *Scale and format of the MA-Modules*

It is necessary that the modules are big enough to remain financially lucrative (with exceptions in some fields). Wouter de Kruijff views a module to be cost neutral when 19 students are registered, based on a success rate of 80%. If we calculate all the theses individually (in case of 1120 theses a year, that amounts

to 28.000 hours), that would entail that only 354 seminars are required, which will lead to theoretically saving more than 10.000 hours of the calculated 79.000 hours now spent on education. A reduction of more than 12%.

However, these are fairly general statistics, and the Faculty has not been able to provide a more detailed overview of the costs and returns of the programs. As the current administration in SIS cannot deliver reliable data, it is absolutely necessary to receive correct data about the costs and returns of the programs. Without such a reliable overview any restructuring is based on no facts at all, which could seriously endanger the sustainability of the program.

To set a minimum of 20 students per the different MA-modules would be impossible. It is legitimate for MA-education to cost more than BA-education, but that does not entail that the modules' success rates should not be considered. Besides, the differences in the formats of the MA-modules should also be considered. Especially, when it comes to differences between regular masters, dual masters, research masters, which all offer the students a different time frame.

This entails that every single module has to receive a minimum of 15 students. In order to secure the quality of education, classes should not hold more than 25 students.

A consequence of this model is that some modules are thematically or methodologically oriented. However, teachers within these modules can still draw attention to their expertise. This will interest students more in the different themes and specifications offered by the modules. However, it is of great importance that a module is not shaped and organized as a place where every week another teacher can show all the tricks he or she has on his or her sleeve. The form and content of the module should be constructed carefully and has to fit the other modules simultaneously. Methodological and thematic modules with interdisciplinary characteristics, are often perceived by students as superficial courses. For that reason it is highly important that the format and content are fixed, so the management and presentation of these modules are most efficient.

Especially the bigger studies and programs should receive more space in order to broaden the attention given to their own discipline. But, it is the smaller studies and programs that will actually profit from this restructuring. Other universities have great experiences with shared modules (e.g. "The Humanities: Past, Present and Future" at the University of Utrecht for all research master students at the Faculty of Humanities). These overlapping courses should be considered carefully and rationally before implementing them into a program. It is up to the organization of each program whether they believe such a course to be desirable.

Additionally, it is desirable to link the Research Master Programs to the different Research Schools of the Faculty, in order to improve the relation between education and research. This does not entail that the regular or dual MAs should also follow this path.

This approach concerning the modules has the benefit that some studies, programs or tracks should be abolished now. The Workgroup suggests that all programs should first be restructured. If, after restructuring, the new academic goals and qualifications of a program are not met, the program can then be abolished.

Of course, this policy should be executed alongside the faculty regulations that make the cancellation of programs possible. If, after closer examination, it appears that such broad restructurings of the programs will cost too much time due to the binding consult of the Advisory Board, it is advisable to collaborate with the Advisory Board in discussing and designing the procedures for initiating and canceling programs.

The modules are the core of calculating the sustainability of each program. The Head of Faculty could – if he or she deems necessary – maintain specific unsustainable programs that hold an important position by means of other criteria. Program Directors can send in a request for such an exception at the Head of Faculty.

#### *Exception to the rule*

Tutorial education can function as an important part of the MA-programs, as is proven in the Research Masters. There is no reason to believe from a didactic point of view that this type of education would be less effective on other master levels, such as the regular master and the dual master. Tutorials should be stimulated next to the regular offer of seminars and classes, as research proves that personalized education is more effective. However, tutorial education should not be stimulated too much. Many students do benefit more from classical instructions and discussions. Besides, tutorials should not be used as an excuse to keep programs with low student counts going.

A way, in which this tutorial policy can be given shape, is by providing Program Directors of regular masters with a (limited) amount of hours that should be spend on tutorial education. The number of hours will be based on a percentage. These tutorials should educate four to eight students. It is up to the Program Directors to decide which tutorials have sufficient academic and didactic qualities, or which are of strategic importance. In this way, tutorials can be used wherever it is necessary, for example when modules do not attract the minimum amount of students.

Another option would be a broad 12 ECTS module with room for a tutorial-inspired specialization, like at the University of Leiden. This would entail a 6 ECTS classical theoretical part, and a 6 ECTS tutorial, or rather specialization, part with focus on the program of each student. These broader modules offer a platform where different programs come together which will encourage interdisciplinarity.

Besides the regular academic modules, the one-year program needs to offer modules focused on the job market or internship tutorials, comparable to those of the dual master. Some of these modules already exist, but we could also think of program exceeding modules in which a pool of teachers with relevant expertise prepares the students for the job market on a more practical level. Possible modules:

- Art Criticism
- Public History
- Popularization
- Cultural Journalism
- Didactics and Communication
- Writing and Editing
- Cultural Entrepreneurship

The expertise within the Faculty of Humanities necessary for developing and executing such modules is now scattered amongst, or limited to one of, the programs, while this expertise could be relevant to a large group of students that in the current state cannot benefit. Such modules will draw many students in, and can function, due to its popularity, as a compensation for those modules that do not attract so many students. This possibility should be explored more.

*Decision-making on the floor. Quality and profile, no opportunism*

Reformation on course level is, notwithstanding the many possibilities, an uncertain project. Larger programs may, at first sight, benefit from the removal of smaller programs, while smaller programs have to struggle to create an appealing and coherent program. At the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen guiding through courses didn't always turn out well, because the students must think the program appealing for the plans to turn out successfully – and their interest isn't programmed beforehand. *“studenten kunnen nog altijd met hun voeten stemmen”*. It is crucial therefore that students and teachers on the floor, who know what students want and who are aware of changes, play a crucial role in the decision-making process.

More than that: the drawback of programming at course level could be a watered down compromise that derives from calculated thinking. This way programs could easily lose their focus. It is therefore not wise to use a mix-and-match approach in which everyone can create a course with everyone, only to ensure full lecture halls. For focus in programs and academic profiling, it would be better to think in 'domains' of disciplines, which can initially cooperate to make sure their programs are attuned to one another and their content is fully appreciated. In some studies/programs/tracks cooperation is more obvious: the domains should be defined by involved program directors, in consultation with the program teams. Think of domains like historical studies, international studies, art and culture, philosophy, literature, linguistics and media. The program directors and program teams could additionally be advised by program-related 'curriculumcommissions' – partly composed by students – to help them create an academic sturdy and appealing curriculum. The OC's would have an advising role in this process. The task of the director of the Graduate

School is primarily one of facilitating this process and to make a decision in case of an impasse.

*More conscious combining of generic competencies and expertise*

There has been much debate about whether an MA-diploma should be specialized. There should be no doubt that an MA-study – of any study within this faculty – should be more specialized than the BA. This specialization should furthermore be closely related to the expertise of the teachers. This academic specialization is what differentiates the study from a professional HBO-master and also from some other masters in The Netherlands. Most students with a MA-diploma will not chose a career in academic research, it is therefore important for them to acquire competencies important for them finding a job. This explicitly accentuating competencies for or student outflow is essential for further profiling of the faculty.

Courses on MA-level should therefore be deliberately formed for this double mission in realizing academic specialization and generic competencies. This absolutely does not mean that students will be forced to acquire practical knowledge of the job market (even though many students rightly find this important). The value of an academic study for the market lies in exactly those academic competencies. But it is important this added value will become visible during the study. An education with little chance of a job is not appealing for many students.

From the WO-monitor it is clear that students think the dual masters are not academic enough in the current situation, while students in one-year masters think the preparation for the job market is insufficient. The right balance, with visitations in thought, is indispensable. On the one hand studies can profile themselves more clearly through this balance; on the other hand are they able to learn from each other's *best practices*: introduce internship tutorials within the one-year master or problem focused courses in which a concrete problem from their field takes a central place, so it will be clear how the academic competencies of students will help them solve such a problem.

The academic level of the MA can be guaranteed by making sure every master has a visible approach of common academic courses, in which the students learn generic competencies and are involved in scientific research. In this way the formation of cohorts is stimulated, with the expected outcome of fewer dropouts.

Convergence in courses within, for example dual and normal MA's, could lead a number of students in each course that is sufficient for some dual masters, especially in those programs that are bound to have a lower inflow of students due to limited internship places. This is now sporadically done, but it can be done more systematic.

*Administrative improvements: scheduling and better control of study trajectory students*

It is important – especially if the number of MA-courses will be reduced – that the courses are interchangeable, if that is possible within the directives of those programs (especially in respect to the room for choice courses). This means the schedules should be made to make sure ‘full’ lecture halls are possible.

As far as possible there will be a domain-course in the first period: a larger methodological course concerning the *state of the art* in a discipline. The specialized courses (two out of six) will be postponed to the second or fourth period. In this way a situation is created in which specialization courses can be used as choice courses and for some programs no extra choice courses would have to be scheduled (in case of insufficient course attendance). This large interchanging of choice courses (and specialized courses) is not desirable for all programs/studies/specialties, because some studies and programs are successful (in inflow, output and course return) without these domain courses. Specialized 12 ECTS courses should be able to be scheduled, but if possible the 6 ECTS choice courses will be scheduled in such a manner as to make them interchangeable with other studies.

It is further important to strive for an effective administration of student inflow in every course. Course return numbers are now polluted by students who don't unsubscribe, even though they do not have a participating role in the classes. Some students who formally do not meet the entry requirements do subscribe and are only belatedly removed from participant lists, thereby creating the illusion the courses are full, even though this is not the case. An additional problem is that students subscribe – just to be sure – for too many courses. To break this circle it is necessary to check the entry requirements in an early stage. In April or May students who have subscribed doubly could be asked which courses they will actually take, also because of a possible waiting list. In selective MA's other suited candidates who were initially denied because there were too many good candidates, can be admitted. In this way selective programs (like the profession oriented tracks) can reduce dropout. Better control concerning these matters will increase the reliability of course return numbers.

Accompaniment of master students in their graduation deserves attention. Study delay and course return are more worrisome when it concerns the thesis than if it concerns core- and choice courses. It is therefore essential to make sure students are adequately prepared for their thesis phase, for example by writing long papers in their 12 EC courses (and, if possible, in 6 EC courses). To better prepare students in writing their thesis, investing in intake, matching and tutoring is important. In the current GHS-budget there is little space for introducing these three instruments. More investments in this are crucial as to better help the selected students, during the course of their entire study, and during the writing of their thesis. This investment will lead to higher graduation return.

#### *Effective communication and marketing*

At this moment GHS prepares for introducing selection criteria for all one-year MA's. Considering severe criteria will be determined, it is important for

programs to be more concerned with focused recruitment for their future students. It is important for the faculty to invest more in marketing (for example information on their website), but also in accompanying programs to develop more focused information for future students.

To make students aware of the content of the programs and an accurate balance between academic expertise and generic competencies, it is important to communicate this more effectively than it has been done so far. In the study guides a big improvement can be made. In many cases it is not clear which courses are part of which programs and what is their content. With a few exceptions interested students end up in a labyrinth of possible options to click, without a clear profile. Especially in case of more cooperation it is important to communicate that disciplines will continue to exist – because disciplines attract students. As said before, students want to know what they are choosing for: the study should be worth their investment. The student will know better what to expect of a program with a full presentation of content; this also reduces the chances of dropout. Of importance is also that the GHS prepares for introducing selection criteria in all one-year MA's. Considering severe criteria will be determined, it is important for programs to be more concerned with focused recruitment for their future students. Information is essential: marketing should be an important focal point in this process and the faculty should invest in this.

#### *Timeline*

Sustainability of our programs is not completely detached from their quality. Creating shared courses and in some cases another way of teaching requires time; it is not realistic or responsible to present a substantially reorganized curriculum in September 2016. We need an extra year to realize this. But there are measures that can be implemented in short term, besides all the above mentioned administrative reorganizations. The MA Media Studies (New Media and Digital Culture) has send a clear “call for applications”, which can serve as ‘best practice’. We should form effective policy concerning tutoring in the short term to prevent dropout in MA-programs and to increase graduation returns. This means more hours for the coordinators of the programs, but it is an investment that will pay out. We cannot emphasize enough that this new programming will only work out if it is carefully thought out, because we will otherwise undermine or even lose our appeal for students and our academic integrity. For the sake of our students, our staff and our joint future, sufficient time is needed to make the most optimal choices.