

RESEARCH MASTER OF GERONTOLOGICAL SCIENCES

VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT BRUSSEL

UITBREIDING STUDIEOMVANG • ADVISORY REPORT

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1 Information on the application

Institution	Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Programme	RM of Gerontological Sciences
Language of instruction	English
Level and orientation	MA
Number of credits	120 EC
Location	Brussels
Application received	6 June 2018
Additional information	17 October 2018
Framework	Operational Framework for the Expansion of Study Loads in Master's Programmes (19 July 2013)

2 Assessment per criterion

2.1 Career progress

The expected progression to research careers at an institution of higher education and research organisations within the commercial sector, in social organisations and in government.

The evidence on student progression which is provided in the application indicates a relatively low number of students being enrolled in the PhD programme in gerontology, and this is commensurate with the picture of postgraduate research training in gerontology in other countries providing English-taught programmes, including the UK, but excluding the USA where the tradition of undergraduate and postgraduate training in gerontology is longer. The programme expects to enrol 5 to 6 students per year, with a maximum of 8 when more eligible students apply.

Of those who have completed the PhD in gerontology at the VUB, all but one remained in academia. So far, 10 individuals have received the PhD in gerontology: 5 became faculty, 3 are in academic research positions and one person is the coordinator of a Master's programme. The one individual who has left academia became a policy advisor on senior citizens.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the low number of students, the policy relevance of gerontology as a discipline which amalgamates insights from a range of other disciplines has never been greater, both in a national and international context. There is an increased interest in individuals with strong knowledge and research skills in the field of gerontology, and there are no national and few international institutions that currently cater this need.

The proposed programme has the ability to offer the perfect preparation for starting a PhD in the field of gerontology, and will undoubtedly make the PhD trajectory more efficient. On the one hand, it would offer the perfect recruitment pool for strong and motivated students, reducing dropout from the PhD programme. On the other hand, it gives students a head start for their PhD with two submitted papers before even enrolling in the PhD programme, undoubtedly shortening PhD trajectories.

However, the proposal's strong focus on the preparation for PhD trajectories holds a caveat. Since external funding is looked at for securing PhD positions, increased enrolment depends on funding agencies' willingness to increase the share of research funds allocated to the field of gerontology. High quality grant applications do not automatically translate into a higher number of grants approved. Nonetheless, also career prospects for those not entering PhD positions would be boosted by the new programme, as non-academic research positions do not necessarily require a PhD.

The applicants could also further emphasize the relevance of PhD graduates from gerontology to business and industry sectors against the background of an increasing European focus on technological and digital innovation, economic growth and inclusivity in the labour market. The applicants should be aware of the fact that students might be focused on both academic jobs and more practical jobs both after the Research Master's programme and after the PhD, and mature students and mid-career professionals, if any, may even rather want to enhance their knowledge and skills and continue working within their occupational field.

The application provides sufficient information to support the conclusion that students will have adequate career opportunities after successfully finishing the new Research Master of Gerontological Sciences.

Judgement

Satisfactory

2.2 Research focus

The programme relates to the areas of research focus at the institution of higher education.

The application provides a detailed outline of how the proposed Master's programme relates to existing research activities and priorities within the VUB. The links outlined in this section are particularly exciting and conducive to developing a multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary programme which is relevant to scholars with a wide range of research and methodological interests.

The VUB's research area of 'The Cycle of Life' and the 'Gerontopole Brussel' centre act as important foundations for the proposed programme's ability to attract high-calibre scholars who are interested in being situated in a multi-disciplinary environment during their studies. The explicit collaboration with the University Medical Campus of the VUB, and specifically the Development, Ageing and Pathology research cluster and the Frailty in Ageing group, further strengthens the relevance of the proposed programme, and is a link which is replicated in many other institutions offering postgraduate training in gerontology.

Finally, collaborations between the VUB and other institutions, such as the University of Ghent and the Movement-Related Impairments in Ageing (MOVE-IN AGE) research group, are excellent opportunities for the Master students to benefit from cutting-edge substantive and methodological contributions by experts in their fields.

With on average 40 articles published yearly in international peer-reviewed journals over the last 10 years, at least the Frailty in Ageing group is a rather productive research group.

The VUB certainly has a rich and diverse capacity in the field of gerontology, allowing the programme to reflect the interdisciplinarity of the field in its teaching. Since the social, psychological and biological are so interconnected in old age, with problems in one field easily spilling over into the others, interdisciplinarity is indispensable. Unfortunately, this is not entirely reflected in the proposed research master. Despite proposing an interdisciplinary approach to gerontology including a biological, a psychological as well as a social perspective, the proposal has a rather strong focus on bio-medical sciences as is visible both from the research priority and the teaching staff included. The additional information does suggest that interdisciplinarity is guaranteed at least in terms of supervision capacity.

If the goal really is to offer a fully interdisciplinary programme in gerontology, the proposal does not entirely reflect its ambitions, especially since the VUB certainly has the in-house capacity for a truly interdisciplinary programme in gerontology. Given the very wide space offered to the students to pursue their own interests, both in the master thesis and the research practice sections of the proposed Research Master, there are ample opportunities to also have more staff from outside the biomedical departments involved in the programme in order to widen the students' perspectives on the field.

Hence, the committee wonders in how far the bio-medical 'bias' is intended. If it is intentional or turns out to be the true identity of the Research Master once started, which not necessarily has to be a bad thing, the committee recommends to consider renaming the programme into Research Master in Healthy Ageing. If, however, interdisciplinarity is pivotal, then all research groups working in the field of gerontology should be properly reflected in the presentation and development of the programme.

Notwithstanding the previous remarks on interdisciplinarity, the committee is confident that there is a considerable breadth and depth in valuable research opportunities. Hence, the application and additional information give enough relevant information supporting the conclusion that the programme has a sufficiently adequate research focus.

Judgement

Satisfactory

2.3 Intended exit level

The intended exit level of the programme fits with the exit level that is internationally expected of a research Master's programme.

The very fact that no truly comparable programme exists, is already a good reason in itself to instate this Research Master. It is very clear from the layout of the programme that the intended exit level can offer an excellent stepping stone to start a career in research in the field of gerontology.

According to the committee, the programme team is to be commended for combining learning outcomes which refer to students' skills as future researchers within larger multi-disciplinary research teams, in addition to the more standard substantive and methodological skills which would feature in other gerontology degrees. Overall, the learning outcomes presented for the proposed programme are ambitious and well-thought through. However, a couple of outcomes or related courses need further clarification in the future development of the programme.

Related to the learning outcome 'conduct scientific research within the field of gerontology and / or geriatrics, apply the different methods and techniques of the gerontological research, statistically process the collected data and interpret the results and discuss them in a scientifically sound manner' the title of the two modules Master Classes in Statistics and Advanced Master Classes in Statistics is slightly confusing as the word statistics usually refers to quantitative analysis and skills. The programme team may wish to consider revising the titles to indicate more clearly to prospective applicants that the module covers both quantitative and qualitative skills.

The learning outcome 'extrapolate existing gerontological theories to the wider elderly sector and contribute to the optimization of the quality of elderly sector' could be worded much more clearly. It's not clear what is meant by 'elderly sector'. And similarly what is meant by 'optimization of elderly sector'. If it refers to the provision of social care in society, then it would be useful to discuss how this learning outcome fits with the learning outcome 'identify current and intercultural issues and developments regarding the elderly and care for the elderly, has an open and critical approach and can apply evidence-based, innovative elements', and how it 'fits' with the rest of the programme.

Moreover, it is utterly important to distinguish between students from the Research Master and PhD students, and to offer them different learning experiences. In any case, the educational value of the programme fundamentally depends on the quality of the supervision given, meaning that supervision should be very close and focusing on giving students a deeper knowledge and understanding of theories, concepts and methods. The additional information provided by the programme team clearly states that it is the programme's 'purpose to integrate the students in a 'real life' research team, coordinated by the promoter and closely supervised by the pre/post-doc researchers involved in the research projects involved'. Thus, students will be immersed in the true dynamics of a research team, receiving feedback 'on the spot', attending workshops, symposia, seminars, etc and all of this combined with timely intervention with the instructors-in-charge of the courses and the promoter. This is in line with the programme's intention to let students identify a topic at the end of the programme's first semester in order to specialize in the context of a real research project in a research team that has longstanding experience in interdisciplinary research. Hence, supervision also plays a key role in opening the gate to true interdisciplinarity.

This is also in line with the committee's first impression that the lectured content is rather basic, both in terms of methods and theoretical courses, and that in-depth knowledge, be it about specific theories or research methods, is gained through extensive 'real life' interdisciplinary research in the field.

One aspect of the programme which could be a consideration for further development by the programme team is the focus on social policies for ageing societies. More specifically, there are two key elements of ageing societies which do not appear to be covered (sufficiently) in the current structure: employment and labour markets, and social protection. Coverage of social policies more generally within the proposed programme is low. This is especially important as there is an increasing recognition among European governments and beyond, that social policies need to be designed with the changing life course in mind (e.g. expansion of longevity, delay of fertility, extended working life, extended retirement). However, this could be (partly) covered by the specialisation topics students can choose. In this respect, the committee also suggests that the programme and the student assignments could be further aligned with more future possible careers (also after obtaining a PhD), e.g. by not only writing articles and research proposals, but also learning how to apply research in writing policy advices and how to use academic research in guiding practical research.

All in all, the committee is convinced that when the minor comments are taken into consideration in the further development of the programme and when adequate supervision is guaranteed, the exit level will be satisfactory.

Judgement

Satisfactory

2.4 Capacity Criterion

If the aforementioned justification criteria are met, then NVAO shall ascertain whether the institution has the relevant capacity to offer the programme with an expanded study load in a manner that provides top quality or whether it has a credible plan to develop this capacity in the short term.

The discussion on the exit level above clarified the pivotal role supervision will play for the programme to be successful. The fte's as mentioned in the application are dedicated to both the Dutch-speaking 'Master in Management, Zorg en Beleid in de Gerontologie' and the Advanced Master in Gerontological Sciences that will be replaced by the Research Master. As the additional information clarifies, the actual teaching capacity is higher as pre- and post-doc fte's have to be taken into consideration for co-supervision when students are integrated in the existing research teams. This teaching and supervision capacity is expected to maintain, if not increase over the next 5 to 10 years, most of it guaranteed by the Faculty of Medicine & Pharmacy. As some of the courses that are implemented from the Advanced Master are reduced in ECTS in order to create further capacity for proper supervision regarding the master thesis, internships & writing tasks, and as a lot of the pre- and post-doc capacity is spent during activities in the research teams, part of the investment may be regarded as research time.

Given the low number of students expected to enrol into the programme, the current capacity should suffice. The only matter to be monitored in this respect, is whether the critical mass required for a Research Master can originate in this setting.

Judgement

Satisfactory

3 Final Judgement

Positive

The committee is convinced that the proposed Research Master will be a good stepping stone for those interested in a research career in the field of gerontology and will produce good researchers in the field, giving those enrolling in the PhD programme a head start.

Given the need for a Research Master in gerontology and the capacity the VUB has in the field to make this a high-quality programme, the committee is very supportive of the initiative. High quality supervision is key to make this programme a success. As the lectures will focus on the basic theories and methods used in the field of gerontology, specialised knowledge and skills will have to be acquired through supervision.

The three most important challenges for the programme are

- effectuating the active participation of all in-house expertise the VUB has in the field of gerontology in order to create full-fledged interdisciplinarity, or rather focus on the bio-medical capacity and reshape the programme as a Research Master in Healthy Ageing;
- guaranteeing, and if required increasing the supervision (and teaching) capacity to make the 'real life' interdisciplinary research experience a true learning experience at Research Master level;
- guaranteeing the critical mass required to create an intellectually satisfying cohort for high-calibre scholars.

These points notwithstanding, the application and the additional information provided by the programme team support the conclusions that career progress, research focus, exit level and capacity are adequate to start the Research Master's programme.

The committee concludes that the application of the Research Master of Gerontological Sciences (120 EC) offered by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel meets the criteria set by NVAO in its 'Operational Framework for the Expansion of Study Loads in Master's Programmes (13 July 2013)'.

4 Overview of the assessments

The panel presents their assessments per criterion in the following table.

Justification criteria	Assessment
1 Career progress	Satisfactory
2 Research focus	Satisfactory
3 Intended exit level	Satisfactory
4 Capacity criterion	Satisfactory
Programme as a whole	Satisfactory

Annex 1: Composition of the panel

The composition of the panel that assessed the quality of the Research Master of Gerontological Sciences of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel was as follows:

- prof. dr. Anna Petra Nieboer, Endowed Professor, Erasmus School of Health Policy & Management, Socio-Medical Sciences (SMS), Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, Nederland;
- prof. dr. Maria Evandrou, Head of the Department of Ageing/Gerontology, Director of the Centre for Research on Ageing, Professor of Gerontology, University of Southampton, UK;
- dr. Wouter De Tavernier, Postdoctoral researcher (retirement and pension policy), Centre for Comparative Welfare Studies (CCWS), Aalborg University, Denmark;
- Jade Brouns, Master in Pedagogische wetenschappen (Onderwijs- en Opleidingskunde), BSc: 2013-2016, MSc: 2016-2018, KU Leuven, België.

On behalf of the NVAO, Dr. Dagmar Provijn, NVAO policy advisor, was responsible for the process-coordination and for drafting the experts' report.

