

RESEARCH MASTER OF SCIENCE IN GERONTOLOGICAL SCIENCES

VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT BRUSSEL

PROGRAMME ACCREDITATION CUSTOMISED TO OWN
CONDUCT • ASSESSMENT REPORT

5 JUNE 2026



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1 Abstract

This assessment report concerns the programme accreditation customised to own conduct for the Research Master of Science in Gerontological Sciences at Vrije Universiteit Brussel. The panel assesses the quality of the study as satisfactory and recommends that the NVAO take a positive accreditation decision.

In its preliminary investigation, the panel found sufficient evidence to support the programme's strong research-oriented profile, its clearly articulated educational vision and coherent curriculum structure organised around interrelated learning paths fostering advanced research competencies. The panel focused its further investigation on areas such as student intake and sustainability, staff capacity, interdisciplinary balance, methodological diversity, constructive alignment between teaching, learning and assessment, the student experience, the achievement of the intended exit level and possibilities for graduates.

The panel identified several strengths of the programme, such as the intellectually stimulating and supportive learning environment characterised by intensive supervision, close staff-student interaction and a strong research culture. Students feel heard and benefit from personalised coaching, while alumni and representatives from the professional field confirm the strong research competencies and readiness of graduates for PhD trajectories. The Master's thesis is a central component with outputs reaching publication level, and sometimes also published. The professional field appreciates both the interdisciplinary orientation of the programme, as well as the relevance of the skills obtained by its graduates in academic and applied contexts.

At the same time, the panel identified several areas for further improvement. Student intake requires a more strategic and targeted recruitment approach to ensure sustainability and maintain sufficiently sized cohorts. The panel further recommends strengthening the alignment between Intended Learning Outcomes, teaching and assessment, and ensuring clear ownership and systematic monitoring. Finally, while the student experience is overall positive, additional initiatives at campus level could further support the integration and sense of belonging of international students.

2 Methodology

2.1 Composition of the panel

In accordance with the assessment framework 'programme accreditation customised to own conduct', the NVAO appointed an assessment panel consisting of four experts. The panel is composed as follows:

- ANNA PETRA NIEBOER (chair), Full professor Socio-Medical Sciences (SMS) - Erasmus School of Health Policy & Management; Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam;
- ATHINA VLACHANTONI (panel member), Professor of Gerontology and Social Policy University of Southampton, England; Director ESRC South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership;
- JOKE RAATS (panel member), Head of the Applied Gerontology Programme – Artesis Plantijn Hogeschool Antwerpen / Arteveldehogeschool / Karel De Grote Hogeschool; researcher at Universiteit Hasselt;
- ANNA GHESKIERE (student panel member), medical student at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

The panel was supported by VEERLE MARTENS (process coordinator and policy advisor at NVAO) and ROXANNE FIGUEROA (external secretary).

All panel members have signed the NVAO Code of Ethics and have been trained for their assignment by the NVAO. The panel collectively possesses all expertise required for this assessment.

2.2 Methods of investigation

The assessment was carried out based on the framework '*programme accreditation customised to own conduct*' of June 2020, as endorsed by the Flemish Government on 27 November 2020.

Once the application submitted by the institution had been declared admissible, the NVAO appointed the above-mentioned panel. This panel was approved by the NVAO's Executive Board. The institution did not raise any objections regarding the composition of the panel.

The panel prepared for the assessment based on the documents provided by the programme. Prior to the dialogue, the panel drew up an investigative proposal. Each panel member analysed the materials supplied and, based on this, formulated an initial appraisal. The panel then consolidated these individual inputs into a single coherent investigative proposal, delineated with priority themes and questions.

During the preparatory activities, the panel discussed all information obtained and prepared the points of dialogue with the institution and the programme.

Using NVAO's Appreciative Approach, the panel further explored the context of the programme during the dialogue on the 24th of April 2026 and, on that basis, investigated the achieved quality of the programme.

During the concluding activities, the panel discussed all information gathered and translated this into a holistic judgement. The panel reached this conclusion in full independence.

All available information was incorporated into a draft assessment report. Once all panel members had agreed to the content of the assessment report, the chair of the panel formally endorsed the report. The assessment report endorsed by the chair was subsequently submitted to the NVAO.

3 Investigative proposal

Based on the documents submitted for the Research Master of Science in Gerontological Sciences at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), the panel members each drew up an initial appraisal and identified outstanding questions. This analysis of the material studied was compiled and elaborated by the panel into a coherent research proposal, in which the priority themes and research questions for the site visit were clearly defined.

From the examination of the Self-Assessment Report, the panel identified several elements as clear strengths of the study programme. In particular, it finds that the study programme demonstrates a well-articulated educational vision and a clear research-oriented profile, aligned with the mission of Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the societal relevance of ageing research. The Intended Learning Outcomes consistently reflect the development of research competencies and preparation for doctoral trajectories, while also supporting the formation of students as emerging researchers who can contribute to the field of gerontology. Research is embedded throughout the curriculum, in teaching and assessment. Through its curriculum, the programme aims to develop students' capacities for critical inquiry, analytical reasoning, methodological rigour and academic writing with an emphasis on the production of publishable work, thereby aligning the programme objectives with the intended graduate profile.

In addition, the panel noted the structured organisation of the curriculum into interrelated learning paths, which effectively support the development of research competencies. The study programme's active research culture, close student-staff interaction and initiatives that promote peer learning are considered to make an important contribution to the overall student experience. The intended integration of biological, psychological and social perspectives within an interdisciplinary framework and the programme's international engagement were also positively noted. Overall, the panel concludes that these strengths confirm the study programme's strong research orientation and supportive learning environment.

The panel concluded that the elements outlined above were sufficiently clarified in the Self-Assessment Report and therefore did not require further exploration during the dialogue with the programme. Based on the preliminary investigation, the panel identified several areas for more in-depth examination during the site visit.

Firstly, the Self-Assessment Report highlights relatively low student numbers, high dropout rates and a relatively large number of non-EER students. Against this background, the panel sought to gain further insight into the factors contributing to the seemingly high drop-out figures and how are these addressed, the projected enrolment, recruitment strategies, current cohort composition and the support provided to international students. In addition, the panel planned to discuss with the students and alumni their overall learning experience, including intake, support structures and workload management. The panel also wanted to engage in dialogue with the teaching staff about their workload, supervision capacity, expertise and the integration of temporary or postdoctoral staff.

Secondly, the panel sought to gain further insight into the structure and the content of the study programme. Particular attention was given to the balanced integration of biological, psychological and social dimensions across courses, research projects and supervision, with a specific emphasis on the psychological and social domains, as well as to the allocation of overarching responsibility for ensuring balanced coverage. In addition, the panel was interested in the constructive alignment of the Intended Learning Outcomes with the course objectives, learning activities and assessment and the monitoring of the coverage concerning these Intended Learning Outcomes. Furthermore, it wanted to explore how qualitative and mixed-methods competencies - in addition to the clearly evident quantitative methods - are acquired and scaffolded throughout the curriculum so that students can conduct interdisciplinary gerontological research and produce outputs suitable for doctoral studies.

Lastly, the panel sought to gain further insight into the study programme's exit level and the guidance of its graduates. It explored whether the Master's thesis serves as a reliable instrument to assess the Intended Learning Outcomes and overall exit level. Furthermore, it examined how the study programme supports progression towards doctoral studies and research careers. It wanted to learn more about the availability of PhD positions and the funding mechanisms thereof, the effectiveness of the support for graduates to progress into research careers, both nationally as well as internationally. The panel wanted to find out more on the clarity of the communication about progression pathways and the accessibility thereof for students and wished to discuss this with the management of the programme and the representatives from the professional field.

4 Holistic judgement

Based on the preliminary research and the site visit, the panel has reached a positive conclusion regarding the quality of the Research Master of Science in Gerontological Sciences at Vrije Universiteit Brussel. The panel therefore advises the Board of NVAO to make a positive accreditation decision.

The panel found that the programme demonstrates a strong and coherent research-oriented profile, with a well-articulated educational vision that is consistently reflected in its Intended Learning Outcomes, curriculum structure and learning environment. The organisation of the curriculum around interrelated learning paths, combined with intensive supervision, close staff-student interaction and a strong research culture, creates a supportive and intellectually stimulating environment that effectively prepares students for research careers. The panel finds that the coaching sessions provide a valuable and supportive form of personalised guidance for students. Students and alumni demonstrate a high level of engagement and indicate that the programme is responsive to their feedback. In addition, the diverse and international student population was often mentioned as a strength, enriching classroom discussions through the range of perspectives it brings.

The panel appreciates that the programme is characterised by a clearly defined interdisciplinary approach, in which biological, psychological and social perspectives are formally integrated within the curriculum, an aspect also appreciated by stakeholders of the programme. However, based on its review of research topics, Master's theses, course content and internships, as well as its discussions with stakeholders, the panel finds that the social dimension is currently perceived as less developed in terms of depth and implementation. The panel therefore suggests further strengthening this dimension and ensuring that the Course Council actively monitors the balance between the different domains at study programme level. The panel also observed that, while the programme demonstrates a solid methodological foundation, research practice remains predominantly quantitative, not due to a lack of expertise but rather because of practical feasibility constraints. The Master's thesis contributes to the achievement of the intended outcomes, with alumni confirming their readiness for PhD trajectories and, in many cases, successful publication of their work. The programme is also well regarded by the professional field, which appreciates its interdisciplinary nature and the strong research competencies of its graduates, and confirms their readiness for both academic and applied contexts. Clear progression opportunities toward PhD ensure that the educational vision is consistently implemented, effectively supporting students' academic development. At the same time, the panel learned that the competencies developed within the study programme also hold clear value beyond academia. It therefore finds that alternative career pathways, including professional and business-oriented roles, could be highlighted more to better reflect the full range of opportunities available to graduates.

Following the dialogue with the programme, the panel formulated several recommendations to further strengthen the programme. Firstly, the panel found that student intake remains limited and vulnerable, characterised by small cohort sizes, relatively high dropout rates and an overrepresentation of non-EER students, which raises concerns regarding sustainability and funding. At the same time, the panel notes that the most recent cohort is larger, indicating that ongoing efforts to strengthen recruitment are showing results. The panel considers that maintaining sufficiently sized cohorts is essential for ensuring an optimal learning environment and to support the programme's pedagogical objectives. It therefore recommends defining clear intake targets and reinforcing the recruitment strategy, with particular attention to increasing visibility and attracting a more balanced student population. In this context, the panel underlines the importance of ensuring that sufficient staff capacity remains available to sustain the current level of intensive supervision when implementing this recommendation.

Secondly, the panel examined the alignment between the Intended Learning Outcomes (ILO), teaching activities and assessment. It found that alignment is supported at programme level by instruments such as matrices and processes including the annual update of course descriptions. The panel points out that its implementation in practice depends to a considerable extent on individual teaching staff, which it considers a potential risk to ensuring consistent and transparent alignment across the programme. The

panel also observed some ambiguity regarding ownership of the alignment between ILO and assessment, as responsibilities are distributed across different roles. It was primarily through the discussions with representatives from the professional field and alumni that the panel was reassured about this point, as this provided evidence of the achieved exit level and confirmed that graduates effectively achieve the ILO. The panel therefore recommends strengthening the explicit alignment between ILO and assessment, and ensuring clear ownership and monitoring of this alignment across the programme.

Finally, while the panel found that the student experience is overall highly positive, it learned that initiatives for international students are primarily organised at Campus Etterbeek at central university level, with limited provision at the Health Sciences campus. The panel therefore recommends that the programme and the faculty take a more proactive approach in developing targeted initiatives at campus level to support the integration of international students and strengthen their sense of belonging.

The panel has observed that the programme has undergone significant development since its initial accreditation and is delivering the quality it sets out to achieve. The panel notes that the programme is ready to move towards a greater degree of shared team responsibility following this accreditation and is confident that in this way the programme will be able to implement the formulated recommendations:

- define clear student intake targets and strengthen recruitment, while ensuring sufficient staff capacity to maintain intensive supervision;
- strengthen alignment between Intended Learning Outcomes and assessment, with clear ownership and monitoring across the programme;
- develop targeted initiatives to support the integration of international students and enhance their sense of belonging.

5 Reporting of the investigation

On 24 April 2026, the panel conducted a site visit at the VUB Health Campus of the Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy. During this visit, the panel met with faculty leadership, programme management, teaching staff, students and alumni, and representatives from the professional field. The day concluded with a reflective dialogue in which the panel and programme management exchanged initial insights. The following sections provide a thematic overview of the panel's key findings from these meetings.

Student intake and composition of the student body

The Self-Assessment Report states that the programme targets students holding an academic Bachelor's or Master's degree in a discipline relevant to gerontology and reports intake numbers ranging from 4 to 13 students between 2019 and 2025. There are almost no Belgian students enrolled in the programme, and the majority of students are non-EER students. However, the factsheet included in the appendix was insufficiently clear, leaving the panel unable to determine the yearly student intake and cohort composition. For this reason, prior to the site visit, the panel requested more detailed enrolment data. The additional documentation provided confirmed the panel's initial impression that student cohorts are rather small. Since the study programme's establishment in 2019, only eleven students have graduated from the programme to date. In this context, the panel sought to further explore the underlying reasons for these figures and to examine which actions the study programme has implemented in response.

This matter was therefore raised during the discussion with the programme management. According to the Chair of the Course Council, the current intake profile is influenced by the university's marketing and communication strategy, which primarily targets students transitioning directly from secondary education, as this is where the available marketing budget is concentrated. As a result, no dedicated resources are allocated to the targeted recruitment of Belgian and international students for the Research Master. The study programme regrets this and is currently undertaking targeted social media initiatives, including LinkedIn and Instagram, to increase its visibility. Students are encouraged to take ownership of these efforts by sharing testimonials and promoting the programme themselves. At the same time, the Chair noted that awareness of the study programme remains limited even among colleagues, despite the fact that VUB is the only university offering this particular programme.

According to the Dean of the Faculty, forthcoming policy changes are expected to present additional challenges for the programme regarding student intake. In particular, funding for non-EER students will be reduced, meaning that an increasing proportion of non-EER students would result in lower overall financing for the programme. Seeing as most of the current cohort is a non-EER student, this was identified as a significant concern. The Dean indicated that this calls for a more strategic emphasis on recruiting students from within the European Union as well. The Vice-Chair of the Course Council mentioned that broadening the admission criteria might result in admitting students who do not fully anticipate the intensity of the programme. This, in turn, is considered one of the factors contributing to the dropout of students.

In this context, the panel noted that dropout rates are relatively high and that study efficiency indicators are below the VUB average, with a longer than average time to graduation. According to the programme management, this is partly explained by insufficient preselection in the initial phase of the study programme, leading to students enrolling with limited engagement or withdrawing due to the academic intensity. This situation has improved over time as the programme has gained experience in screening prospective students and providing additional coaching and guidance. The Self-Assessment Report mentions that dropout is to be interpreted because of informed reorientation after exposure to the demands of research-intensive training, rather than an academic failure. The Vice-Chair mentioned that, when the programme management observes that students are struggling to cope with the academic demands, these students are advised to consider alternative study paths that may be more suitable. It was also noted that dropout can sometimes be linked to personal and financial circumstances. To better

understand students' reasons for leaving the programme, the Chair of the Course Council invites students to participate in an exit interview, although participation is not mandatory.

The panel subsequently discussed the selection process with the students and alumni. They indicated that selection was based on CV screening and an online interview focused on expectations, motivation and ambitions rather than in-depth testing of academic background. Before the interview, several introductory sessions took place where applicants could ask questions. Students noted that this approach was comparable to standard admission procedures for similar programmes. The students and alumni generally felt that the selection process was appropriate and sufficiently informative about the study programme.

The students and alumni did indicate that the cohort size has a strong impact on the student experience. Sufficiently sized cohorts were associated with a stronger sense of community and lower dropout, whereas small groups were perceived as challenging. In particular, students and alumni indicated that very small cohorts can limit interaction and reduce the diversity of perspectives in discussions, thereby affecting group dynamics and engagement. In addition, students noted that when the effective group size decreases further due to absence or dropout, opportunities for peer learning and the development of a supportive learning community are significantly reduced.

In conclusion, the panel found that the selection process has been strengthened and that efforts to improve recruitment, expectation management and student support are ongoing. It also noted that the most recent cohort is larger, indicating that these efforts are beginning to yield results. At the same time, the panel emphasises that maintaining a minimum level of student intake remains essential to ensure an optimal learning environment and to support the programme's pedagogical objectives. The panel therefore recommends that the study programme define clear intake targets and strengthen its recruitment strategy, with greater emphasis on promoting its distinctive profile and increasing its visibility among both international and national students.

Staff capacity

According to the Self-Assessment Report, potential tensions exist between student intake and available staff capacity, as the study programme's small group size supports intensive supervision but may be difficult to sustain if student numbers further increase. The panel therefore explored how these concerns are addressed, with particular attention to whether the current staffing structure can ensure sufficient supervision for research-intensive student projects. From the discussions with programme management and teaching staff, the panel learned that the current staffing structure is considered adequate at present. However, the previously identified external and institutional pressures to increase student intake may challenge the programme's ability to maintain this intensive supervision approach, particularly as additional support capacity would be required.

The panel was also interested in understanding how temporary staff are integrated into research supervision, since reliance on temporary or limited staff could risk maintaining the intensive research supervision model. From the discussion with teaching staff and assistants, the panel learned that newly appointed teaching staff, such as PhD researchers, are consistently linked to a supervising professor. While they are actively involved in multiple aspects of the programme, including thesis supervision and student coaching, these activities are carried out under the guidance of senior academic staff. The students also mentioned that they experience the teaching staff as highly passionate about the study programme and that the staff actively seek to inspire students' interest in ageing. On this basis, the panel concludes that the current staffing structure is adequate to sustain the study programme's model of intensive guidance. At the same time, the panel asks the study programme to maintain this level of student support when implementing its earlier recommendation to define clear intake targets and strengthen its recruitment strategy to attract students with the right potential and realistic expectations.

Interdisciplinarity

According to the Self-Assessment Report, the study programme demonstrates a strong interdisciplinary orientation, in which students engage with biological, psychological and social perspectives on ageing and are encouraged to integrate insights across the different domains. These domains are described as being closely aligned with the research expertise of the teaching staff. The panel was curious to learn how they are embedded in practice across the curriculum, research projects and supervision. In particular, the panel sought to clarify the integration of the psychological and social dimensions, as from the documentation the curriculum and research training appeared to be more strongly oriented towards biomedical and rehabilitation sciences. Furthermore, the panel wanted to investigate the mechanisms in place to ensure coherent and balanced coverage of all three domains.

The Chair of the Course Council mentioned that this concern had also been raised during a focus group session with students and explained that differences in teaching formats and interaction styles may have contributed to the perception of students that the social domain receives less attention, while in terms of study credits and course content, societal aspects are in fact covered across multiple courses. The panel learned that the integration of the domains mainly happens in the course unit Organisational and Intercultural Aspects of Ageing, as well as in the research projects. Responsibility for monitoring the balance and coherence across the domains is formally assigned to the Course Council.

The course titular of Organisational and Intercultural Aspects of Ageing subsequently informed the panel that interdisciplinarity is primarily realised through a holistic teaching approach within individual courses, in which biological, psychological, social and cultural perspectives on ageing are consciously combined. They indicated that specific responsibility for the social domain lies primarily with the course unit Social Fundamentals of Ageing, taught by a colleague who was unable to attend the site visit.

The students indicated that the social dimension could receive greater attention in practice. While the formal weight of the social component is considered adequate, its depth was perceived as less developed compared to the biomedical and psychological domains, which was attributed to differences in how courses are organised and delivered. The panel did note that the variations in students' disciplinary backgrounds influence these perceptions, with those with a sociology background expressing a stronger need for more in-depth engagement with social gerontology. Representatives from the professional field similarly indicated that further strengthening the balance between the different disciplinary domains could enhance the programme. In addition, they suggested several areas for further development, including the involvement of older adults as experiential experts and a stronger emphasis on the medical foundations, for example through greater attention to basic knowledge of chronic conditions.

The panel appreciates that the study programme clearly pursues an interdisciplinary approach and that teaching staff actively seek to address course content from multiple disciplinary perspectives. While the three domains are formally assigned equal weight, the panel's analysis is that the programme tends to be more strongly oriented towards the research expertise of a limited group of core staff. This is reflected in the focus of research topics of the Master's theses, course content and the internship placements. The panel therefore concludes that, although the programme is clearly interdisciplinary in its design, the social dimension could be strengthened further to achieve a more balanced interdisciplinary profile. In this regard, the panel suggests the Course Council to actively monitor and safeguard the balance between the different domains.

Research methods

Based on its preliminary analysis of the Self-Assessment Report, the panel found that the programme has a clearly defined Research Master identity aimed at preparing students for doctoral trajectories in gerontological sciences. The Intended Learning Outcomes strongly emphasise independent research, critical analysis, methodological rigour and the production of publishable output. At the same time, the panel noted that the research reflected in the course unit content and Master's thesis topics appears to be predominantly quantitative in nature. This observation led the panel to take a particular interest in

the extent to which qualitative and mixed-methods research are addressed within the study programme, given their relevance for studying ageing processes and care practices.

The panel discussed this matter with programme management and learned that expertise in qualitative research methods is indeed present within the teaching staff, particularly through the course titular of Clinimetrics and Comprehensive Gerontological Assessment, who also supervises qualitative Master's theses. Furthermore, the course titular of Advanced Master Classes Statistics (Quantitative & Qualitative) indicated that mixed-methods approaches are addressed within the context of study design. Students are also exposed to qualitative and mixed-methods through workshops, one-on-one training and data collection. At the same time, it was acknowledged that the balance is not equal, with qualitative approaches representing a smaller share of the overall methodological training.

Although the panel initially assumed that the strong emphasis on quantitative research methods could be explained by the specific research expertise of the teaching staff, it became clear that substantive expertise in qualitative and mixed-methods research is indeed present within the programme. Greater clarity on this point emerged particularly through the discussion with students and alumni, who indicated that both quantitative and qualitative research methods are addressed and that the overall methodological training is perceived as balanced. Students reported having the opportunity to engage with both approaches and, in some cases, to combine them in their research. At the same time, they pointed out practical constraints, such as language barriers for international students, which limit the feasibility of qualitative research, as well as the availability of predefined quantitative research topics and datasets. As a result, students are more likely to opt for quantitative research approaches.

The panel concludes that, while the programme demonstrates a solid methodological foundation, the overall practice remains predominantly quantitative. The panel recognised that this is not due to a lack of expertise, but is influenced by issues of feasibility, including the availability of ready-to-use datasets and the additional effort required to set up qualitative research. It also noted that the student profile, particularly the large proportion of international students, may make it more challenging to implement qualitative and mixed-methods research, mainly due to language constraints. At the same time, the panel saw potential in further exploring complementary strategies, such as secondary qualitative analysis or the collection of qualitative data from English speakers in Brussels, to achieve a more balanced methodological profile in practice.

Constructive alignment

The Self-Assessment Report mentions that the structure of the curriculum is organised around four interrelated learning paths covering theoretical, methodological, integrative and personal development aspects. The panel appreciated this structured approach and found that these pathways seem to effectively support the development of students' competencies in research, theory and applied practice. At the same time, the panel noted that the Intended Learning Outcomes (ILO) and their mapping across courses, as well as their alignment with assessment methods, were not sufficiently clear based on the documentation provided. To this end, and as part of its preliminary analysis, the panel examined several course units in more detail via Canvas, which indicated that some learning outcomes were not always clearly visible within the course content. The panel therefore requested an overview of the ILO in relation to the course units, teaching methods and assessment, which was provided shortly prior to the site visit in the form of a matrix.

The quality assurance officer explained to the panel that this matrix provides an overview of the relative contribution of each course to the ILO. Teaching staff indicate whether a learning outcome is considered core (1), important (2), addressed (3), or not applicable in their course(s). The panel learned that this information is collected through internal surveys of the teaching staff coordinated by the quality assurance office. This results in a matrix which allows for the Course Council to maintain an overview of the coverage of the ILO across the study programme.

The panel observed that most courses tend to cover a wide range of ILO, while several learning outcomes are also linked to multiple courses. For example, the panel noted that ILO 16, relating to the

development of an attitude of lifelong learning, was indicated as being addressed (3) across nearly all course units. When asked how the programme ensures this learning outcome is covered, the panel learned that lifelong learning is primarily conceptualised as an attitude developed across the entire study programme. Programme management explained that this is fostered by encouraging students to continuously update their knowledge and to engage critically with the literature. In addition, examples such as student-initiated journal clubs were mentioned as practices that support the development of this attitude, although these elements are not always clearly reflected in the matrix.

The Chair of the Course Council further explained that the ILO were developed alongside the overall programme design during its transition to a Research Master. Starting from a shared mission and vision, the ILO were defined in close collaboration between the Course Council, the research group and the teaching staff, resulting in a jointly developed framework rather than a top-down approach. From the discussion with the teaching staff, the panel learned that the ILO are generally used as a starting point for course design. They also indicated that alignment is monitored through annual updates of course descriptions, discussions at Course Council level and ongoing student feedback, which may lead to adjustments where needed. As an illustration, they informed the panel that the Systematic Review course was adapted in response to changes in available expertise and student feedback, resulting in a more blended learning format that integrates input from staff with qualitative research expertise and involves collaboration with other faculties.

In particular, the panel also sought to gain insight into how the ILO are translated into assessment practices. Based on its preliminary analysis, it appeared that certain learning outcomes were not explicitly assessed, which the panel considered a potential risk for transparency and consistency in achieving the programme's objectives. From the discussion with the teaching staff, the panel learned that alignment between learning outcomes and assessment is supported by instruments such as assessment matrices and rubrics. In addition, some teaching staff indicated that a four-eyes principle is applied in their evaluation process and that further support is provided by the pedagogical support team of VUB. The panel observed some ambiguity regarding ownership of the alignment between ILO and assessment, as responsibilities are distributed across different roles. The quality assurance officer highlighted the role of teaching staff, given their subject-specific expertise, while teaching staff referred to the Course Council as responsible for maintaining the overall overview. The panel therefore identified a need for clearer alignment and responsibility allocation regarding the ownership of this process.

Further insight into assessment practices was gained from the discussion with students, who indicated that they are provided with detailed rubrics, sample exam questions and guidance throughout the semester, enabling them to understand expectations and evaluation criteria. They also noted that teachers explain the focus of assessments and provide opportunities to ask questions, contributing to a clear overview of how courses are organised and assessed. The panel understood from this discussion that students recognise the broader structure of the programme and the progression from theoretical foundations to more research-oriented components, which is perceived as logical and coherent.

Nevertheless, the panel remained concerned about whether the programme can ensure that all ILO are explicitly and systematically assessed to guarantee the achievement of the intended exit level. It was primarily through its discussions with alumni and representatives from the professional field that the panel was reassured in this regard, as these stakeholders expressed a notably positive view of the achieved level of graduates and confirmed their strong preparedness for research careers (see also the last section). The panel therefore concludes that the study programme succeeds in achieving its intended outcomes, as graduates are well prepared for research-oriented trajectories. At the same time, it finds that the clarity of the alignment between the ILO and assessment - although supported by instruments such as matrices and processes such as the annual update of course descriptions - remains insufficiently transparent. This alignment appears to rely considerably on the interpretation and practices of individual teaching staff and is not consistently visible for all learning outcomes. In addition, the panel observed that ownership of the alignment between ILO and assessment remains unclear, given the distribution of responsibilities across various roles. The panel therefore recommends that the study programme makes the linkage between ILO, teaching activities and assessment practices more

clear to enhance transparency. Furthermore, the panel recommends taking clear ownership and accountability for monitoring and ensuring this alignment across the programme.

Student experience

The panel read that the student experience is characterised by intensive supervision, close staff-student interaction and strong integration into research activities, supported by the study programme's small-scale design. Challenges related to workload peaks, communication clarity and expectation management within a diverse and international student population were also mentioned. Against this background, the panel sought to gain further insight into the student experience, including aspects of scheduling, guidance for self-study and support for international students in understanding the Flemish higher education system. In particular, the panel aimed to examine to what extent students feel adequately supported in engaging with the programme, managing their workload and achieving their research outcomes.

The Chair of the Course Council informed the panel that, since last year, process coaching has been implemented, in which small groups of two to four students are guided on a biweekly basis by a PhD or postdoctoral staff member. These sessions monitor students' progress across the entire programme. It was mentioned that the programme adopts a flexible and responsive approach, adjusting deadlines where needed and supporting students in managing the demanding combination of research outputs and thesis work. While tools are provided to help students plan their workload, it was acknowledged that students often rely on their own systems, and that expectation management remains an important aspect of guiding students through the realities of a research-intensive programme. The teaching staff further indicated that the coaching sessions enable them to maintain close contact with students, monitor their progress and offer follow-up support where needed, for example in relation to data skills or workload management.

From the student perspective, the panel learned that coaching sessions are generally experienced as a valuable and supportive form of guidance. They appreciated the opportunity to discuss their overall progress and reflect on academic decisions in a non-judgemental setting and valued the more personal, one-to-one conversation with teaching staff. The panel also learned that students feel their input is taken seriously on programme level and that the programme demonstrates openness to change. While they noted that implementing changes may take time, students indicated that they already observe concrete improvements following feedback provided in the previous academic year, which they experience as motivating and as a positive sign of responsiveness within the programme.

The teaching staff described the diverse student population as enriching, as it brings a broad range of perspectives on ageing, care practices and cultural contexts into the classroom. At the same time, they noted that working with an international cohort requires adaptation, both for staff and students, particularly in managing differences in expectations and in encouraging students to engage actively with teaching staff. The panel further explored how students experience the transition to the Flemish higher education context and learned that their experiences of adaptation vary. While some students indicated that their prior academic background prepared them well and that they did not experience significant differences, others noted that the programme requires a high degree of self-directed learning compared to more structured, teacher-led systems they were previously familiar with. Students highlighted that initial orientation sessions, including explanations of grading practices, were helpful in facilitating this transition. At the same time, students expressed dissatisfaction with the limited initiatives for international students at the campus level, as most activities are concentrated at the main campus of VUB in Etterbeek, which was perceived as limiting opportunities for integration and community building within their immediate study environment.

The panel concludes that the introduction of coaching sessions is a positive development, as these significantly contribute to strengthening the research culture and student-faculty cohesion. The panel is particularly impressed by the active student engagement, open dialogue and collaborative development of the study programme. It finds that students act as ambassadors for the programme and feel that their input is taken into account. While a diverse and international student population was considered a

clear strength across various discussions, as different backgrounds and cultures contribute to a variety of perspectives in the learning environment, the panel observed that initiatives for international students are currently primarily organised at the central university level, with limited provision at the Health Sciences campus. The panel therefore recommends that the study programme and the faculty take a more proactive role in facilitating the inclusion and integration of the international students and in strengthening their sense of belonging on campus.

Exit level and opportunities for graduates

The panel sought to examine whether the Master's thesis serves as a reliable instrument for assessing the study programme's ILO and overall exit level. To this end, it reviewed the documentation provided, including the thesis topics, and requested access to a sample of Master's theses together with the associated assessment criteria and marking practices. This allowed the panel to gain initial insight into the thematic focus and quality of the theses, although it noted that further information on grade distribution and the nature of feedback would have enhanced its understanding of the evaluation process. During the site visit, the panel further explored these aspects through its discussions with the stakeholders. It learned that students could select their own thesis topics and that they are linked to a supervisor through a matchmaking process. Students are supported in writing their thesis through the mentioned intensive supervision and coaching and are expected to produce research outputs at a level suitable for publication. The alumni interviewed by the panel confirmed that this expectation was realised, indicating that they had all successfully published their work.

The Self-Assessment Report mentions that the study programme is designed to prepare students for academic careers in gerontological sciences and to facilitate progression towards PhD trajectories. The panel therefore sought to examine the extent to which sufficient PhD opportunities and funding are available for graduates, how effectively the programme prepares students for research careers, including at international level, and whether progression pathways are clearly communicated and accessible to students. It learned from programme management that access to PhD positions is highly competitive and cannot be guaranteed. However, the study programme supports students in strengthening their chances through the development of research portfolios, including writing and publishing, which enhances their competitiveness for doctoral positions both within and beyond the institution. The programme management also indicated that students are actively informed and prepared for funding applications, including specific workshops and guidance on Flemish funding mechanisms. In addition, the study programme benefits from an international academic network and encourages joint PhD trajectories. Several alumni confirmed to the panel that they, as well as their fellow graduates, successfully progressed to PhD positions and highlighted that the research skills developed during the study programme, such as conducting a systematic review, significantly supported this transition. They emphasised that the research skills acquired, including the ability to independently design studies, communicate scientific findings and collaborate internationally, were valuable and contributed significantly to their professional development.

The programme management indicated that approximately two thirds of students express the ambition to pursue a PhD. During the discussion with the students, the panel learned that the study programme is indeed strongly positioned as a preparatory trajectory for doctoral studies and that this is an important motivation for many students to enrol. At the same time, some students expressed interest in non-academic career paths and noted that relatively limited attention is given to these opportunities. In addition, the alumni mentioned that the competencies acquired through the study programme are applicable across a wide range of jobs and suggested that these alternative career perspectives could be more prominently highlighted during recruitment and in the programme.

The panel met with a delegation of representatives from the professional field, including both national and international partners, as well as stakeholders from academic and non-academic contexts. From this discussion, the panel learned that the study programme is highly valued, particularly for its strong research-oriented focus and interdisciplinary approach. They emphasised the relevance of the programme in addressing complex challenges related to ageing and highlighted the quality and research readiness of the students. Stakeholders with experience supervising interns reported positive

experiences, noting that students can contribute to research activities, particularly in data analysis and, in some cases, even to thesis supervision and teaching. Some graduates have already progressed to PhD positions or employment within these organisations. While representatives from the professional field emphasised that maintaining a strong research focus is essential for the study programme, and several explicitly valued it as a preparation for PhD trajectories, they also pointed to broader opportunities for graduates beyond academia. In particular, they highlighted the potential added value of graduates in research and development contexts within industry.

The panel observed that the students and alumni demonstrated a high level of satisfaction with, and even pride in, the study programme. It found the discussion with representatives from the professional field to be particularly valuable and was impressed by the large number of international and non-academic partners participating, which reflects a strong level of engagement. Based on these discussions, the panel concludes that the study programme effectively achieves the intended learning outcomes related to independent research, critical analysis, methodological rigour and the production of publishable work.

Clear progression opportunities toward PhD ensure that the educational vision is consistently implemented, effectively supporting students' academic development. At the same time, the panel learned that the competencies developed within the study programme also hold clear value beyond academia. It therefore finds that alternative career pathways, including professional and business-oriented roles, could be highlighted more to better reflect the full range of opportunities available to graduates.

Annex 1: Administrative data regarding the programme

Institution	Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Name programme	Research Master of Gerontological Sciences
Qualification and specialisation	Research Master of Science in Gerontological Sciences
(Additional) title	/
(Part of the) field of study	Social Health Sciences
Majors/specialisations	/
Programme routes for working students, full-time/part-time education, day/evening trajectories, different formats of certification	/
The location at which the programme is taught	VUB Health Campus Laarbeeklaan 103 1090 Jette
Language of instruction	English
Workload (expressed in credits)	120 ECTS

Annex 2: Programme-specific learning outcomes

The Master of Gerontological Sciences has knowledge and understanding of

1. the scientific basis of the existing gerontological theories and areas of implementation
2. the different perspectives within the gerontological sciences
3. the methodological principles inherent in the gerontological research domain
4. the ethical aspects of scientific research in the field of Gerontology

The Master of Gerontological Sciences can

5. 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
6. report, present and defend (own) results -in writing and orally- in a didactic and scientifically sound manner (at the level of an article in an international peer-reviewed journal)
7. draw up and defend a competitive application for (national or international) research funding
8. identify current and intercultural issues and developments regarding older persons and their care, has an open and critical approach and can apply evidence-based, innovative elements
9. look up, critically analyse and interpret relevant scientific literature / sources
10. reflect on their own professional conduct
11. extrapolate existing gerontological theories to the wider ageing sector and contribute to the optimization of the quality of the ageing sector
12. integrate in a (inter-disciplinary) research team

The Master of Gerontological Sciences has

13. a (self-) critical and scientific attitude, focused on the Gerontological Sciences
14. a focus on sustainability in the proposed solutions for an ageing society
15. the intercultural competences required to be able to cope -as world citizens- with current and future challenges in the globalized and ageing society
16. acquired an attitude of lifelong learning, thereby enabling them to continue to develop on a fully independent basis and to make adjustments in the domain of gerontological sciences.

Annex 3: Schedule for the dialogue with the programme

Time	Meeting
09h00 – 10h15	Meeting with faculty leadership, programme management and support services • Dean, Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy • Director of Education, Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy • Faculty Coordinator, Research Master of Gerontological Sciences • Vice-Chair for the Research Master within the Programme Board of Gerontology • Policy Officer for Education, Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy • Student Psychologist at the Study Guidance Centre • Quality Assurance Officer, VUB
10h45 – 11h45	Meeting with teaching staff and assistants • Course Council Chair & ZAP Research Methodology & Healthy Ageing • Course Council Chair Research Master & ZAP Biogerontology • Course Council Chair Dutch Master & ZAP Psychogerontology • Post-doc Assistant • Pre-doc Assistant • Pre-doc Assistant • ZAP Intercultural Aspects of Ageing • Teaching Assistant
13h00 – 14h00	Meeting with students and alumni of the programme • Student year 1, Student representative Course Council • Student year 1, Student representative Course Council • Student year 1 • Student year 2, Student representative Course Council • Student year 2, Student representative Course Council • Alumnus • Alumnus • Alumnus
14h30 – 15h30	Meeting with representatives from the professional field • Lithuanian Sports University • University of Coimbra • UniWeb bvba • Autonomycs • Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport – The Netherlands • Lecturer at Artevelde University of Applied Sciences & Member of the Ghent City Council
17h00 – 17h30	Reflective dialogue • Dean, Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy • Director of Education, Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy • Faculty Coordinator, Research Master of Gerontological Sciences • Vice-Chair for the Research Master within the Programme Board of Gerontology • Policy Officer for Education, Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy • Quality Assurance Officer, VUB

Annex 4: Overview of the materials reviewed

Documentation submitted with the application:

- Self-Assessment Report
- Appendices
 - Appendix 1: International benchmarking
 - Appendix 2: Flow to RM and PhD
 - Appendix 3: Fact sheets
 - Appendix 4: Programme matrix
 - Appendix 5: Overview of course titulars and their expertise
 - Appendix 6: Teaching staff
 - Appendix 7: Master Thesis Score Analysis

Documentation submitted prior to the dialogue:

- Three Master's theses and completed assessment documents
- Rubrics for the assessment of the Master's theses
- Overview of absolute student numbers per academic year
- Figures on applications per academic year
- Overview of the ILO in relation to the course units, teaching methods and assessment
- Study programme ECTS guide
- Access to course materials via Canvas

Documentation submitted during the dialogue:

- Overview of Master's thesis topics and list of internship placements

