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1 INTRODUCTION

A study programme is based on the view held by the University regarding the questions to what end are students educated and how are they educated for a specific profession. In essence, the curriculum is the tool by means of which these goals are achieved. The contents of the curriculum and the teaching methods used determine what students are taught and how they are taught.

Maintaining an overview of the cohesion in and quality of the entire curriculum is no mean feat, especially given the fact that lecturers are usually involved in one or at most a few of the courses of a curriculum. The lecturers mainly focus on their own teaching activities, and for coordinating their course with the other components of the curriculum they need the support of fellow lecturers, staff members of the Education Office, faculty teaching coordinators, etc.

Apart from the substantive importance of an adequate curriculum, its structure and cohesion also play an important role in the study progress of students. The mutual alignment of subjects, the prior knowledge of students, planning study load, scheduling interim examinations and resits, as well as using teaching methods that motivate students to a greater or lesser degree, etc. are all aspects of the curriculum that have a distinct effect on students’ progress.

Due to the importance of a high-quality curriculum, this constitutes a major component of the accreditation system of the Accreditation Organisation for the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). During a study programme accreditation procedure the level of the curriculum is examined and, especially, how the curriculum is structured.

As it appears from accreditation applications submitted and from the experience of VU University's quality assurance steering group, STOK (which assesses applications for new study programmes at VU University) and OKZ (which assists programme managements with writing critical self-evaluation reports and applications for new study programmes), it is often difficult to clearly describe the structure of the curriculum in accordance with the NVAO criteria. The following bottlenecks are identified:

- the exact meaning of various terms in the NVAO framework is often unclear (such as attainment targets, teaching concept, educational objectives);
- it is difficult to establish how the various terms in the NVAO framework are

1 For an overview of research on the factors that affect success rates, refer to the Checklist *Rendement Hoger Onderwijs* [Higher Education Success Rates Checklist] of Leiden University Graduate School of Teaching (ICLON), Leiden. [http://www.studiesuccesho.nl/2011/11/20/checklist-concept/](http://www.studiesuccesho.nl/2011/11/20/checklist-concept/)
interrelated (such as the relationship between aims and objectives, attainment targets, and educational objectives);

- the tasks and responsibilities regarding the curriculum are often not clear and monitoring is often not properly organised.

The aim of this chapter of the Quality Manual is to offer the faculties more grip by describing how a curriculum should be structured and by indicating the tasks and responsibilities of the parties involved. It closely follows VU University’s Vision for Education as well as Theme 1 (‘Aims and Objectives’) and Theme 2 (‘Curriculum’) of the NVAO accreditation framework. The approach described in this chapter for setting up a curriculum is a practical one so as to be workable for faculty staff.

2 OBJECTIVES, THE PARTIES INVOLVED, AND TASKS

This chapter provides information on how an adequate curriculum should be structured. Besides, it indicates how a curriculum should be described in order to comply with the requirements of the NVAO framework.

Apart from the NVAO framework, the agreements in force at VU University, as set out in the University’s Guidelines on Bachelor’s and Master’s degree programmes (see VUnet: https://vunet.login.vu.nl/_layouts/SharePoint.Tridion.WebParts/redirect.aspx?cid=tcm:164-371423-16) also play a role in this chapter.

Finally, the parties involved in the curriculum are identified and each party’s tasks and responsibilities are indicated. This chapter also contains suggestions on how one could organise quality assurance of the curriculum, i.e. monitoring how the tasks and responsibilities are executed.

2.1 STRUCTURE OF THE CURRICULUM

According to the guidelines of the 2011 NVAO accreditation framework a curriculum ought to comply with the following three quality requirements.

2.1.1. VU University’s Vision for Education

The NVAO expects a vision for education on education (or aims and objectives of a study programme) which briefly outlines what a study programme stands for and what kind of graduates the University would like to deliver. The Vision for Education, therefore, expresses the end to which students are educated in relation to a particular societal demand or the need for graduates with specific expertise in certain fields. From the point of view of the quality of November 2013
education provided and of public relations it is important that a vision for education is elaborated. Not only does it serve as a point of departure for the development of education, but it also serves as a “study programme philosophy” ensuring internal cohesion on the basis of the questions: what do we as lectures stand for? and what use will it be to students once they have graduated? In this sense, a vision for education, rooted in consensus, constitutes the foundation underpinning study programmes.

Appendix 1 contains examples of views on education.

2.1.2. Contents of the Curriculum

Attainment Targets

That part of the Vision for Education that relates to the contents of the curriculum is further elaborated in the attainment targets (also called learning outcomes). The attainment targets spell out in detail the final qualifications that each graduate of a specific study programme should have achieved. The attainment targets describe in which areas and at what level students have acquired substantive knowledge and skills on completion of a study programme, the methods and techniques with which they are familiar, and also the level at which they can set up, perform, and present a research project. If skills such as working on a team are significant for the study programme, they should also be included in the attainment targets. The attainment targets are defined at the level of the curriculum rather than at year or subject level. As a rule of thumb, a curriculum should have between six and ten attainment targets.

When writing a critical self-evaluation for a study programme accreditation or for an application for a new study programme, NVAO expects the programme management to demonstrate clearly that the curriculum (i.e. the curriculum components that constitute the study programme as a whole) adequately reflects the attainment targets in terms of level, orientation, and domain-specific requirements. One way of illustrating this is by using an ‘objectives-tools matrix’. This matrix indicates for each of the components of the curriculum to which attainment targets it makes a significant contribution (see Appendix 2 for a sample of an objectives-tools matrix).

Attainment Targets and the Dublin Descriptors

The Dublin Descriptors were developed as part of the so-called Bologna process. This is the name given to the process underway throughout Europe aimed at arriving at a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The aim is to achieve a transparent supply of higher education study programmes that will facilitate student mobility and recognition by universities of one

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another’s degrees and diplomas. Step-by-step various elements are developed and introduced. The familiar abbreviation ECTS, which stands for European Credit Transfer System, is an example of an instrument developed within this context: credits expressed in ECs (European Credits) can be compared with one another via this transfer system (TS) and have, therefore, become transferrable.

Different levels of education are distinguished in the EHEA. The three main levels (referred to as ‘cycles’) correspond to the three highest levels in the European Quality Framework for Lifelong Learning, EQF\(^3\), that was designed later.

\(^3\) For more information see: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/eqf08_en.pdf

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The EQF describes the learning outcomes related to all education in eight levels: from primary school all the way through to a university doctorate. Levels 6, 7, and 8 relate to higher education and describe the learning outcomes at the Bachelor's, Master's, and doctoral level. Level 6 (Bachelor's) and level 7 (Master's) are described in Appendix 6.

The Dublin Descriptors were also developed in connection with the EHEA. They describe the generic level of the learning outcomes that correspond to a Bachelor's or Master's degree on completion. The Dublin Descriptors describe the learning outcomes in terms of five dimensions: Knowledge and Understanding, Applying Knowledge and Understanding, Formation of Judgements, Communication, and Learning Skills.

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<tr>
<th>EQF</th>
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<td>Bachelor’s – first cycle</td>
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<td>Master’s – second cycle</td>
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<td>Doctorate – third cycle</td>
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The relationship between EQF and Higher Education Framework levels

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Appendix 3 contains the Dublin Descriptors as they are also used for accreditation purposes. In the accreditation framework, NVAO expects study programmes to demonstrate that the finishing level of a study programme corresponds with the generic level described by the Dublin Descriptors\(^4\). In concrete terms, this can be demonstrated by showing, for each of the five dimensions of the Dublin Descriptors, which attainment target or targets, or learning outcome or outcomes of the study programme correspond to that particular descriptor. In this way, the programme management demonstrates that students are trained to the required level of a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree.

Appendix 4 contains an example of a way in which attainment targets may be linked to the Dublin Descriptors.

**Learning objectives**

The lowest level at which the content of the curriculum ought to be described are the learning objectives of the different subjects. The learning objectives are the minimum requirements that a student should meet in order to pass a subject. A learning objective is a detailed elaboration of one of the attainment targets. Several learning objectives are formulated for each subject. A distinction can be made between generic learning objectives and subject-specific learning objectives. Generic learning objectives correspond to the general behavioural traits of all academics (in terms of communication, cognitive skills, ethics, etc.). These learning objectives should also be incorporated in the curriculum; not necessarily in the form of separate subjects (like Academic Skills modules), but the learning objectives may also be incorporated in a specific subject.

The learning objectives of a subject may correspond to different attainment targets. In Appendix 5 the attainment targets are linked to curriculum components, learning objectives, teaching methods, and types of testing. Appendix 7 describes the correct way of formulating learning objectives.

**Cohesion**

Naturally, within the curriculum there is a difference in level between, for example, the learning objectives of a first-year subject and the learning objectives of a third-year subject. Each subject ought to expand on the learning objectives attained in previous modules. In this way a progressive line is created in the curriculum, so that on completion of the study programme, all the attainment targets will have been achieved.

NVAO expects programme managements to demonstrate that students are following a

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\(^4\) The European ‘Tuning project’ is working on substantiating the Dublin Descriptors for different fields of study. For more information refer to: [http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/](http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/)

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A cohesive curriculum by showing that the curriculum is carefully constructed: it should have a clear and well thought-out structure, the different subjects and themes should be aligned one with the other, and the programme management is obliged to ensure an adequate combination of breadth and depth.

Cohesion in the curriculum may be demonstrated with learning pathways. Learning pathways are constructed along logical lines and form a chain of curriculum components: which subjects, terminologies, or skills should be learnt successively in the consecutive years of the study programme. Often one can detect an ascending degree of difficulty and skills developing from simple to complex. Learning pathways offer insight into a step-by-step approach to course material, thus avoiding excessive repetition, or preventing leaps that are too large as a result of which students no longer understand the material or fail to spot the underlying connections.

**Assessment**

The learning objectives of the subjects should be assessed adequately so that one is able to guarantee that each student did actually meet the requirements of the attainment targets on completion of the study programme. Besides, it is important that the types of tests link up with the teaching methods used in the curriculum. Substantiating this relationship is, therefore, also required as part of the critical self-evaluation report for accreditation. Curricula using activating teaching methods (didactic concept), aimed at teaching students numerous skills (attainment targets/learning objectives), administering mainly multiple-choice tests is not the obvious choice.

(For other aspects of assessment, refer to the chapter on Assessment of Courses and Study Programmes, https://vunet.login.vu.nl/services/pages/practicalinformation.aspx?cid=tcm%3a164‐301044‐16).

### 2.1.3. Teaching Methods used in the Curriculum

Once one has established one’s ambitions in the Vision for Education, in other words, once one knows to what end students are educated, one subsequently formulates how students are to be educated. This is described in the didactic concept of the curriculum.

The didactic concept contains the way in which the programme management desires to structure its education. This structure is based on certain didactic principles and teaching methods. Current didactic concepts include both traditional concepts (lecturer-centred...)

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teaching, whole-class teaching) and concepts that focus on active learning (for example, problem-based learning). Nevertheless, the didactic concept need not be an existing concept or one that can be defined with a single term. One may also describe how a particular study programme is structured and why. Appendix 8 contains an example of a didactic concept.

The teaching methods should be an expression of the didactic concept put into practice. One of the pitfalls involved in describing the didactic concept is that the teaching methods are described straight away, while they only represent the practical component of the didactic concept rather than the concept itself. Besides, one frequently formulates or chooses a didactic concept, for example, a familiar term like ‘active teaching’, that is not expressed in the teaching methods because, for example, one’s teaching consists mainly of giving lectures.

2.2 THE PARTIES INVOLVED

Different individuals and bodies are involved in the curriculum.

- Faculty Board
- Teaching Portfolio Holder (and possibly the Director of Teaching)
- Study Programme Director
- Study Programme Committee
- Head of the Department
- Examining Board
- Lecturers (Subject Coordinators)
- Students
- Alumni/Representatives of the professional field
- Head of the Education Office
- Centre for Educational Training
- VU department for Education and Quality Assurance (Onderwijs en Kwaliteitszorg -OKZ)

2.3 TASKS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PARTIES INVOLVED

The tasks and responsibilities of the different participation bodies and committees within the faculty are laid down in the faculty regulations. With reference to curricula faculties may differ from another in this respect.

In any case the Faculty Board is ultimately responsible for all curricula. It establishes changes to curricula (by amending the Teaching and Examination Regulations). The Teaching Portfolio Holder or the Director of Teaching carries the day-to-day responsibility. Depending on the

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agreements made within the faculty, these responsibilities may be delegated to the Study Programme Director, Study Programme Coordinators, Study Programme Managers, Bachelor’s and Master’s Committees, etc.

The Faculty Board needs prior consent of the joint faculty meeting (Faculty Student Council and the Divisional Committee) for every decision involving the faculty regulations and laying down or amending the Teaching and Examination Regulations, with the exception of ‘substantive’, subjects (for further information refer to the chapter on Educational Organisation: https://vunet.login.vu.nl/services/pages/practicalinformation.aspx?cid=tcm%3a164‐301044‐16).

The Study Programme Committee is a joint committee, that is to say it is made up of equal numbers of students and teaching staff. Each study programme ought to have a Study Programme Committee. The main task of the Study Programme Committee is to monitor the quality and practicability of a study programme and to identify bottlenecks. The recommendations of the Study Programme Committee are submitted to the Study Programme Manager or – if lecturers are concerned – to the relevant Head of the Department.

The Study Programme Committee is entitled to propose changes and to request supplementary information on all education-related subjects. Changes to the curriculum are submitted to the Study Programme Committee for advice. In addition, the Study Programme Committee is entitled to vote on amendments to the Teaching and Examination Regulations and the Committee is obliged to evaluate these regulations annually and to make recommendations.

The Heads of Departments are in charge of the organisation and coordination of the departments’ activities. After consultation with the Director of Teaching or the Teaching Portfolio Holder, the Heads of Departments divide the teaching duties amongst the members of the department. The Heads of Departments discuss the results of course evaluations with lecturers (including, amongst others, the annual reviews) and monitor compliance with agreements on changes to the teaching methods or contents of the curriculum.

The Examining Board enforces the Teaching and Examination Regulations and organises and coordinates matters involving interim examinations and final examinations. The Examining Board’s duties include appointing examiners and drawing up rules regarding the proper procedure surrounding interim examinations. In addition, the Examining Board monitors the entrance level of students and it has the authority to approve or reject the individual curriculum of students. Moreover, it assesses whether or not students meet the requirements for graduation. Finally, the Examining Board is responsible for, or it may commission another party, to update the Rules and Guidelines.

Lecturers (and Subject Coordinators) are responsible for their own teaching activities. It is their task to provide education and to focus on the educational objectives attached to the subject and the place of the subject within the curriculum. Furthermore, it is their task to align the teaching methods and interim examination of their subject with the educational objectives.

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The interim examinations ought to be of sufficient quality (refer to the chapter on Assessment of Courses and Study Programmes). Annually, lecturers render account to their Head of the Department. At the same time lecturers are evaluated by students and are assessed partly on the basis of these evaluation results (refer to the chapter on Assessment of Courses and Study Programmes and the one on Staff Policy).

Students are expected to express their opinion on the courses they followed through course and curriculum evaluations and though the Study Programme Committee, for the benefit of the quality of the education provided.

Periodically, a survey is held among alumni and representatives of the professional field with reference to the alignment of the curriculum to the labour market. If so desired, the Centre for Educational Training, can assist in improving the quality of the education provided. The faculties may turn to them for support regarding improvements to a curriculum, setting up or describing learning pathways, implementing innovations, evaluating bottlenecks, etc.

2.4 QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR CURRICULA

The quality of curricula is monitored via internal and external quality assurance. (Also refer to the chapter on Quality Assurance).

The basis for internal quality assurance regarding the curriculum consists of:

1. Monitoring and making recommendations on teaching performance and on the structure of the curriculum by the Study Programme Committee. This is dealt with at each meeting of the Study Programme Committee; each year recommendations are made regarding changes to the curriculum. The Study Programme Committee lays down its findings and recommendations in reports which are referred to systematically. Annually, the Study Programme Committee reports to the Faculty Board; see Appendix 11 for a format of the annual report of the Study Programme Committee.

2. Monitoring the implementation of the Teaching and Examination Regulations and the quality of interim examinations by the Examining Board. Annually, the Examining Board reports to the Faculty Board; see Appendix 12 for a format of the annual report of the Examining Board.

3. Monitoring compliance with faculty policy and faculty agreements and with the performance of the Study Programme Committee and the Examining Board, by the Faculty Board; see Appendix 13 for a format of the faculty’s annual report on education.

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4. Monitoring compliance with VU University-wide policy with reference to curricula (for example, students’ progress and dropout rates, the aggregated outcomes of student evaluations, attention for IT, Vision for Education, and so forth) by the Executive Board. This is dealt with in the administrative meetings of the Executive Board and the Faculty Board. The Executive Board and the Faculty Board arrives at result agreements regarding priorities.

The external quality assurance consists of the accreditation of study programmes by NVAO every six years.

3. QUALITY REQUIREMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section outlines quality requirements (mandatory) and recommendations (optional) for the curriculum. The quality requirements and recommendations are intended to safeguard and, if necessary, to improve the quality of the curriculum. The Executive Board had laid down the requirements and recommendations in, amongst others, the Bachelor’s and Master’s Guidelines. The Faculty Board translates the requirements and recommendations to faculty level and monitors compliance.

3.1 CONTENTS AND TEACHING METHODS OF THE CURRICULUM

Requirements

1. Bachelor’s degree programmes are modular and are structured as follows:
   a. An academic core;
   b. A major of at least 90 and at most 120 ECs;
   c. An optional course of at least 30 ECs

2. All subjects are equivalent to 6 ECs and are published in the University’s Educational Prospectus. For each subject, contents, level, and if applicable, entrance requirements are provided. In exceptional cases, for substantive educational reasons, a subject may be equivalent to 3 ECs or a multiple of 3. The number of subjects with a deviant number of ECs may not exceed 10%, i.e. 18 ECs, of the total number.

3. All subjects are offered according to the academic calendar\(^6\).

4. Registering for a subject takes place in accordance with periods laid down by

\(^6\) See: [https://vunet.login.vu.nl/services/pages/practicalinformation.aspx?cid=tcm%3a164-368398-16](https://vunet.login.vu.nl/services/pages/practicalinformation.aspx?cid=tcm%3a164-368398-16)

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5. Bachelor’s degree programmes are arranged in such a way so as to stimulate active participation by students and, hence, benefit their study success. To this end:
   a. The study programme offers at least 12 hours of face-to-face instruction a week (for the 1st year this is 14 hours);
   b. One EC is equivalent to a total of 28 hours of face-to-face instruction and independent learning;
   c. Subjects are divided into three levels: introductory (100), deepening (200), and advanced (300);
   d. Examinations are administered after teaching the subject is completed.

6. Bachelor’s degree programmes contain at least the following components:
   A recognisable academic core of at least 24 ECs, preferably 30 ECs, largely concentrated in the first two years of study and specified according to the nature of the domain to which the study programme belongs, consisting of in any case academic schooling, methods and techniques of scientific research, and philosophy of science. If necessary, the academic core may be augmented by other subjects in the field of academic schooling, methods and techniques and/or philosophy of science, or history of science.

7. The study programme had a well-formulated Vision for Education.

8. The teaching concept is in accordance with the aims and objectives, the contents, and the teaching methods of the study programme.

9. The attainment targets as formulated can in fact be achieved within the context of the education provided.

10. Lecturers formulate the learning objectives of the courses in the correct way (see Appendix 7), align them with the other courses in the curriculum, and ensure that the types of tests suit the learning objectives. The learning objectives of the courses are listed in the prospectus.

11. The programme furthers cohesion in the curriculum by setting up lecturers’ consultation bodies for the first year of the Bachelor’s degree programme and for the Master’s degree programme as a whole.

12. With a view to practicing and acquiring skills such as writing papers, holding presentations, and relevant IT skills, the programme has described the required level (or levels for the different years of the study programme) and the corresponding assessment criteria. These are applied to all subjects of the study programme and are known to the students enrolled in the study programme. The study programme determines in which

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subjects the skills are practised.

13. Each study programme supplies a substantiated interpretation to VU University’s Vision for education.

14. The curricula of the study programmes link up with scientific research.

15. Each Bachelor’s degree programme at VU University offers an optional course of 30 ECs, with the exception of the study programmes Medicine, Dentistry, and Notary Law due to the requirements of access to the professional field. For all Bachelor’s degree programmes the optional course is scheduled for the 1st Semester of the third year. The optional course is realised in the study programmes concerned by the academic year of 2013-2014, at the latest. Students can use the optional course by doing a minor (a cohesive package of optional subjects), additional (optional) subjects offered by the study programme, a work placement, international experience abroad, etc.

16. The study programme offers each student the opportunity to acquire international experience. Examples include staying abroad, a study trip, teaching provided by foreign lecturers or following subjects that are evidently internationally oriented (also see the chapter on Internationalising Education).

17. Each Bachelor’s degree programme offers the possibility of doing an honours programme (English- medium). In this respect, the study programme does not have to provide an entire honours programme independently, but it can join forces with a faculty or university honours programme. The study programme includes the honours programme in the Teaching and Examination Regulations and it contributes to the honours programme (also see the chapter on the Honours Programme).

18. During the study programme, demonstrable attention is paid to preparing students for the labour market.

Re 11. This requirement can be met in the following way: a lecturer consultation body may be set up for lecturers of an entire academic year as well as for lecturers who teach subjects that constitute part of a particular learning pathway in the curriculum. Standard items on the agenda of such lecturer consultation bodies could be:

- The objectives-tools matrix: a matrix in which the various curriculum components are plotted against the attainment targets of the curriculum. The key question is which curriculum components make a major contribution to which attainment targets.
- Accelerating students’ progress
- Improving alignment between components
- Introducing new teaching methods

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Need of training

Re 14. A link between scientific research and teaching is achieved by:

- Involving lecturers in scientific research
- Paying attention to research skills in the courses

Recommendations

1. The programme ensures that VU University’s Vision for Education is recognizable in the curricula of study programmes; the Vision for Education is visible in faculty policy plans, learning pathways, and individual teaching modules.

2. Lecturers arrange their teaching methods (including testing formats) in accordance with the features of VU University’s Vision for Education.

3. The study programme offers a variety of teaching methods, whereby also in study programmes with large numbers, students work in small groups. The teaching methods should encourage students to ‘active learning, one’s own responsibility’. The lecturers facilitate this.

The recommendations do not imply that all educational components must meet all the features of VU University’s Vision for Education. One considers the curriculum as a whole and courses are chosen whereby aspects of the Vision for Education are elaborated.

3.2 Practicability of the Curriculum

Requirements

1. The programme management ensures that, within the preconditions of the academic calendar, interim examinations, written assignments that are to be assessed, and such like, are administered throughout the year. Insofar as is allowed by the academic year, interim examinations are not scheduled too close together and they do not coincide with the deadlines for submitting written work or other assignments to avoid competing for the study time of students (also see Section 4.3).

2. Bachelor’s and Master’s degree programmes guarantee a proper alignment of the November 2013
4. Master’s degree programmes have adequate and transparent entry requirements. Admission requirements for Master’s degree programmes are formulated in terms of knowledge, understanding, and skills. The requirements regarding admission and prior knowledge are derived from the attainment targets of the Master’s degree programme. The requirements are such that students who are admitted can reasonably meet the requirements within the study load and study duration prescribed by the attainment targets of the Master’s degree programme. These requirements are specified in the Teaching and Examination Regulations of the study programme. For each major subject additional requirements can be set.

5. The study programme - the first contact being the Study Adviser - ensures that students with dyslexia, a disability, or students who suffer from an illness or chronic illness,

a. are properly informed about any special provisions, facilities, or schemes for following and completing the curriculum.

b. are, if necessary, given counselling about compiling a modified curriculum. These modifications may consist of a modified timetable, alternative teaching methods or modules, modified teaching materials, and modified testing.

c. are referred to the Student Counsellor in case of study delay, who informs them regarding their right to financial compensation.

Furthermore, the study programme, in the person of the Study Adviser or the Director of Teaching, ensures that lecturers are properly informed about any students with impairment who are participation in the curriculum and about the special provisions, facilities or schemes made available to them. For further information refer to the chapter on Student Counselling and Supervision and the one on Studying with a Functional Limitation.

Re 2. Proper alignment of the Bachelor’s degree programme with the level of incoming students can be achieved by organising get-togethers between first-year lecturers and VWO [pre-university education] lecturers. Besides, it is important to ensure that the transition from ‘school’ to ‘university’ is as smooth as possible by paying attention to the social and academic integration of first-year students. In this regard tutors and mentors proved to be effective (for more information on tutors and mentors refer to the chapter on Student Counselling and Supervision).

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3.3 EVALUATING THE CURRICULUM

(Also see the chapter on Assessment of Courses and Study Programmes)

Requirements

1. During its meetings the Study Programme Committee discusses the outcomes of course and curriculum evaluations (if applicable) and identifies points for improvement in writing.

2. Each year, the Study Programme Committee holds the Teaching and Examination Regulations and the curriculum against the light, where necessary, makes recommendations regarding amendment of attainment targets, modifying courses or course components, improving the practicability of the curriculum, and modernising and updating the curriculum. To this end, the Committee takes into consideration the outcomes of the course and curriculum evaluations.

3. Each year, the programme management decides which course years will be subjected to a curriculum evaluation, i.e. an evaluation of all the courses offered during one course year). Each course year is evaluated at least once in three years by means of a curriculum evaluation. In addition, the study programme regularly evaluates the entire Bachelor’s degree programme (by means of a Bachelor’s Final Questionnaire).

4. The programme management systematically holds surveys among alumni of both Bachelor’s and Master’s degree programmes. On the basis of these surveys points for improvement are drawn up by the Director of Teaching or the Teaching Portfolio Holder, who also ensures that the plans for improvements are implemented.

Recommendation

The programme management systematically interviews Bachelor’s degree students about aspects relating to the entire Bachelor’s degree programme. The intention of these interviews is that students provide the information necessary for introducing improvements on such overarching aspects such as the provision of information, the curriculum (contents, teaching methods, study load, etc.), and student guidance and counselling. An important question that needs to be answered is whether the students are actually learning what the study programme wants to teach them. If the evaluation indicates that this is not the case, measures for improvements should be undertaken.

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4 EXPLANATORY NOTES

Below, an explanation of VU University’s Vision for Education (Section 4.1) is given (also refer to the Introduction of the Quality Manual), as well as guidelines for achieving cohesion in the curriculum (Section 4.2), and suggestions for improving the practicability of the curriculum (Section 4.3).

4.1 VU UNIVERSITY’S VISION FOR EDUCATION

VU University’s vision for Education is based on the *Instellingsplan Vrije Universiteit 2011 – 2015* [institutional plan of VU University] and is a concretisation of the Vision for Education as expressed in *Verder met onderwijs* [Onward with Education – VU University’s Vision for Education in Theory and Practice], published on the occasion of the celebration of the 130th birthday anniversary of VU University in 2010. See: http://www.vu.nl/en/about-vu-amsterdam/mission-and-profile/educational-vision/index.asp

VU University’s Vision for Education aligns with the university’s academic culture which is characterised by three core values as worded in the above mentioned *Instellingsplan Vrije Universiteit 2011 – 2015: personal, open, and responsible.*

The concept *personal* becomes meaningful because in the context of the dialogue between lecturer and student about prescientific values, the identity of both the lecturer and the student matters. This personal note can find expression in many ways in education: through personal guidance during a graduation project, but also in small-scale teaching methods such as tutorials and practicals.

VU University considers it one of its profile features that space is available within its academic community to debate the question on how one’s personal philosophy of life affects scientific practice. The VU core value *open* is given its specific meaning within this context. The academic community at VU University is characterized by a large variety of backgrounds, ethnicities, philosophies of life, political convictions, learning and life styles. The strength of this diversity lies in the fact that this rich variety does not remain latent and is not discussed but rather, both in education as well as during extracurricular university life it is explicitly challenged. For VU University diversity is a fact of life. It is all about preparing students adequately for occupying responsible positions in a society where diversity is no longer a side-effect pursued or left unpursued, but a concrete and not to be ignored reality.

It is VU University’s intention to educate its students to carry responsibilities in our pluriform society. Therefore, VU also addresses students’ sense of responsibility during their studies. This responsibility is not only concerned with completing one’s studies and with an adequate preparation for professional practice, but it is concerned just as much with delivering a substantive contribution to the Academic community. Hereby VU University’s core value

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The Centre for Education of FPP (http://www.psy.vu.nl/nl/opleidingen/overig-onderwijs/scholing-universitair-docenten/cursussen-universitair-docenten/index.asp), the Universiteitsbibliotheek VU [VU University Library] team involved with advice on teaching (http://ub.vu.nl/nl/onderwijs/docentencursussen/index.asp), and the Centre for Educational Training, offer support for the development of scenarios for teaching methods and development of faculty policy regarding the Vision for Education. (https://vunet.login.vu.nl/organization/pages/department.aspx?cid=tcm%3a164-327502-16)

4.2 COHESION IN THE CURRICULUM

The degree of cohesion in the curriculum can be examined by means of a curriculum analysis. Elements that can be considered include the structure of the curriculum, the alignment of courses and overlap between courses. The Centre for Educational Training, Assessment and Research can provide support in this respect.

Appendix 9 shows how cohesion and structure is given to the Education study programme by using different subject-specific learning pathways in the curriculum.

An example of a method of curriculum analysis, based on learning pathways, is the meetlat vaardigheden [Skills Yardstick] that was developed by the Faculty of Arts. The yardstick is illustrated in Appendix 10. For each of the Dublin Descriptors the yardstick indicates the different skills addressed. Each skill is accompanied by a description of the consecutive levels that together constitute a learning pathway. Thus, a written presentation, oral presentation, and debating skills are three separate learning pathways of the Dublin Descriptor Communication.

A curriculum analysis with this yardstick makes it possible to determine for each subject of a study programme whether and at what level (1, 2, or 3) a particular skill is addressed. Subsequently, in an overview of all consecutive subjects, one is able to see whether the skills that were scored are addressed in the curriculum regularly and whether the levels are well-structured throughout the curriculum, i.e. whether the curriculum displays continuous learning pathways.

4.3 PRACTICABILITY OF THE CURRICULUM

Research, amongst others by Crombag, Van der Drift & Vos, 19857, showed that the structure of the curriculum affects the study habits of students. Scheduling teaching and interim examinations at particular times may have a positive influence on study habits. It is, therefore, advisable to give proper consideration to the timing of teaching and interim examinations.

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Several important findings and/or points for attention from the Crombag et al. study are:

4.3.1 Students’ study habits

If, during a course, a lecturer makes regular demands, for example, requiring writing and submitting interim reports, students will work during the teaching period. If nothing is required of the students during a course, they assume that they do not need to do anything. They postpone studying until just before the interim examination. A lecturer who first schedules a series of lecturers and then plans several lecture-free weeks before an interim examination encourages students to postpone studying until the lecture-free period. Concentrating teaching to a few days a week may lead to students not studying on the other days. Preferably, face-to-face instruction should be spread equally across five working days.

4.3.2 Scheduling interim examinations

Scheduling interim examinations influences study success to a large extent. This does not involve obvious effects such as higher success rates for an easier exam, but rather the effects of timing examinations and resits, the number of interim examinations, and allowing limited compensation between interim examinations.

The following recommendations are made regarding the scheduling of interim examinations:

- the decision on the number of interim examinations to be administered in a course year should be well-considered. Every increase in the number of interim examinations means a drop in the pass rate. This has to do with the fact that for every interim examination, students run the risk of failing unjustly. The size of this effect was calculated for an academic year with eight interim examinations against an academic year with sixteen interim examinations. The point of departure is a pass rate of 70% for each interim examination. The pass rate in this case will decrease from 35% for eight interim examinations to 24% for sixteen interim examinations;  

- in case of relatively high numbers of interim examinations during a course year, compensation for a fail (a score of 5) may be allowed within clusters of interim examinations (with at least a score of 7 for another subject);  

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• interim examinations could best be administered throughout the whole year;
• resits could better be administered in ‘blocks’;
• resits should be scheduled as soon as possible after the first examination opportunity;
• with respect to the above, a balance should be sought, for example, by clustering resits before the next teaching period commences.

If interim examinations are scheduled too close together, the subject of the interim examination which was scheduled earlier is given more attention than the subject dealt with in the interim examination that comes later. If more time were given between interim examinations this would lead to a more balanced distribution of working hours between the subjects, a higher total study load, and a higher success rate in one course without a corresponding drop in a competing course.

4.3.3 Hours of face-to-face instruction

An important issue when structuring a curriculum is how many hours of face-to-face instruction should be scheduled, and what the ratio should be between face-to-face instruction and hours of independent learning. In this respect, one should distinguish between the gross curriculum (1680 hours, 42 weeks x 40 hours) and the net curriculum (1300 hours, 42 weeks x 30 hours; excluding travelling time, breaks, etc.). A total of 1300 hours is, therefore, available for face-to-face instruction and independent learning together.

Research into the effectiveness of face-to-face instruction and independent learning showed that the ratio between face-to-face instruction and independent learning is positively correlated to levels of achievement. The higher the number of independent learning hours per instruction hour in a curriculum, the higher the levels of achievement. Face-to-face instruction should thus primarily aim at stimulating meaningful independent learning. In this context Vos proposed that the presentation - elaboration model (the lecturer explains and the student is subsequently expected to elaborate but procrastinates instead) should be replaced by the preparation - feedback model: immediately before, preferably frequent feedback opportunities (hours of face-to-face instruction, interim examination) students should be given time to prepare.

One should be economical with the number of hours of face-to-face instruction because of the danger that after a certain point, students start compensating with fewer hours of independent learning. This is related to the total available net number of 1300 hours.

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Teaching participation of on average between 325 and 400 net hours annually leads to 820 hours of independent learning. In this respect the ratio between face-to-face instruction (expensive) and independent learning (inexpensive) is better than for other combinations. Research at course level has shown that the turning point at which an increase in face-to-face instruction does not lead to additional hours of independent learning is 12 hours per week.

In the Bachelor’s Guideline the Executive Board of VU University laid down that the number of hours of face-to-face instruction in the first year of a Bachelor’s degree programme should be at least 14 hours per week.

It is recommendable to make transparent to students the number of hours of independent learning calculated for the time needed to prepare for practicals, lectures, tutorials, and for doing assignments.

With the aid of Table 2, the distribution of teaching methods (including the relationship between face-to-face instruction and hours of independent learning) can be made transparent.

### Table 2. Division of teaching methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lectures</th>
<th>Tutorials</th>
<th>Project-based teaching groups</th>
<th>Final paper</th>
<th>Independent learning</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>680</td>
<td>1300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>1300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>880</td>
<td>1300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB: The figures in Table 2 only serve as examples

### 4.3.4 Study load analysis

The practicability of a curriculum can be examined by doing a study-load analysis (sometimes referred to as a nominal curriculum description). This is a description of the curriculum based on the study efforts, on paper, one might expect of students. On this basis conclusions may be drawn regarding the practicability of the curriculum; the distribution of the study load within, for example, a course year or a part thereof, any peak periods, and the possibilities of arriving at a more balanced curriculum in terms of study load. The Centre for Educational Training, may provide support for doing a study-load analysis.

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11 W. van Os, Studeerbaarheid van een curriculum, Onderzoek van Onderwijs, September 1983

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APPENDICES

Click on a link to open an Appendix.

Appendix 1 – Examples of views on education (in Dutch)

Appendix 2 – Objectives-tools matrix of a programme (in Dutch)

Appendix 3 – Dublin Descriptors for the Bachelor’s and Master’s levels (in Dutch)

Appendix 4 – Attainment targets linked to Dublin Descriptors (in Dutch)

Appendix 5 – Attainment targets linked to curriculum components, learning objectives, working methods and test formats (in Dutch)

Appendix 6 – Descriptors of the levels in the European Qualifications Framework (in Dutch)

Appendix 7 – Formulating learning objectives (in Dutch)

Appendix 8 – Sample didactic concept (in Dutch)

Appendix 9 – Sample curriculum structure (in Dutch)

Appendix 10 – Skills yardstick of the Arts Faculty (in Dutch)