



**European Association for  
Public Administration  
Accreditation**

## EAPAA Accreditation Committee Evaluation Report

**Evaluation Report with respect to the request for accreditation of the Postinitial master's programme Public Administration and Organisation Science of Utrecht University, Faculty of Law, Economics and Governance, Utrecht School of Governance (USG), Utrecht, the Netherlands.**

At its meetings of September 3 and 4, 2018 in Lausanne (Switzerland), the EAPAA Accreditation Committee evaluated the programmes against the EAPAA Accreditation Criteria.

### 1. Accreditation Criteria

| 2. Applicability/Eligibility         |  |
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| 0. Preamble                          | This evaluation concerns the postinitial master's programme Public Administration and Organisation Science (called the executive master's programme PAOS throughout this report) offered by the Utrecht University School of Governance: a two-year part-time programme, which consists of three tracks and leads to an MSc degree. Based on the nature of the executive master's programme PAOS, the SVT decided not to use the NVAO Guidelines for the assessment of postgraduate master's programmes in the Netherlands (2017). Although the programme focuses on students with relevant working experience, it is not designed as a postgraduate programme for students who are expected to have completed a previous master's degree. The programme is therefore assessed within the regular framework for (limited) programme assessments. |
| 2.1 Domain                           | The master programme is an academic executive degree programme in public administration. The programme fulfils this criterion.   |
| 2.2 Geography                        | The programme is organized by the Utrecht School of Governance which is situated in Utrecht, as part of the Faculty of Law, Economics and Governance of Utrecht University, the Netherlands. The Netherlands is a member of the Council of Europe; therefore the programme falls within the jurisdiction of EAPAA.   |
| 2.3 Programme longevity              | The programme has not been accredited by EAPAA before, but exists since 2008. The programme fulfils this criterion.  |
| 2.4 Programme variants and locations | There are no variants or other locations.  |
| 4 Category of accreditation          | The master programme opts for the second cycle executive graduate/master level public administration programmes accreditation.   |

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| 5. Standards                        |   |
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| 5.1 Domain of public administration | <p>The SVT learned that the programme as a whole covers all knowledge areas of the PAGO domain specific reference framework. All tracks focus on the knowledge domains of society and changing contexts, governance and networks and (public) policy, decision making and implementation. In addition, the MPI and OCM tracks emphasise knowledge of organisations and organisational principles, while the PG track focuses on knowledge of political and administrative systems.</p> <p>The SVT observed that within each track, the curriculum covers the necessary core domains related to public administration and includes sufficient attention to methodology.</p>  |
| 5.2 Mission of the programme        | <p>The executive master's programme aims at increasing the breadth and depth of theoretical insights and approaches in the respective track domains: organisation, culture and management (OCM), public governance (PG) and management of public issues (MPI). The three tracks of the executive master's programme reflect USG's Public Matters research programme, notably its research lines Public Governance and Management and Organisation and Management. The competency profile of the programme graduates focuses explicitly on staff, management and administrative positions; the emphasis is not so much on preparing students for the labour market (as they already have a job), but rather on helping students to function at a higher academic level in their job and on learning to cope with multidisciplinary issues in professional practice.</p> <p>The intended learning outcomes of the executive master's programme are organised along three inter-related learning pathways: substance of public administration and organisation of public issues; research into public administration and organisation of public issues; and professional conduct in public administration and organisation of public issues. Based on these three learning pathways, executive master's students have to achieve 20 learning outcomes that build further on the educational aims of the bachelor's programme.</p> <p>While the SVT thinks highly of the breadth of the programme, it was surprised to see that the intended learning outcomes are identical across all tracks and that each track realises these objectives in its own way through individual track-specific curricula.</p> <p>In the view of the SVT, the programme would benefit from a more explicit positioning as either one or three programmes.</p> |
| 5.3 Level                           | <p>The formulation of the intended learning outcomes reflects the proper – higher – level of cognitive skills that one can expect of an executive master's student, such as application of knowledge, problem analysis and solution, judgements based on incomplete information.</p>  |
| 5.4 Practice and internships        | <p>The SVT observed that the attention to professional practice is at the centre of this executive master's programme. The programme focuses on the confrontation between theory and practice: participants are challenged on the one hand to examine their own organisations or sectors from a new theoretical viewpoint, while on the other hand they critically approach scientific theories from the perspective of their own practical experience as</p>   |

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|  | <p>professionals. Students are expected to bring case studies from practice and these contributions take on an important role during classes. Moreover, participants can conduct research in their own organisation or on issues that they encounter in their work. Finally, guest lecturers are invited in several courses to share their insights.</p> <p>In order to ensure that participants can make use of the course materials in their everyday professional life, the programme coordinator conducts progress reviews. These individual reviews are often held at the workplace of the student, involving colleagues and the supervisor of the participant.</p>  |
| 5.5.1 Curriculum Content                         |   |
| 5.5.1.1 Core components                          | <p>The executive master's programme PAOS consists of three tracks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public Governance focuses on societal changes and administrative processes;</li> <li>• Management of Public Issues is about the challenges that organisations with a public function face and how to translate these challenges into a meaningful change approach;</li> <li>• Organisation, Culture and Management concentrates on the roles that culture, power and context play in organisations.</li> </ul> <p>The PG and OCM tracks are structured as a linear pathway with foundation courses in year one, in- depth courses in semester three and the thesis preparation process in the final six months.</p> <p>Based on the written materials and the discussions, the SVT wonders to what extent all students who graduate from the executive master's programme have acquired the same set of research skills.</p> <p>The SVT suggests therefore that the programme should decide on a common package of research skills (including among others the level of comfort students should have in handling data sets before they start the master's thesis) that each student should acquire and should then offer this package before they move on to the thesis preparation phase, with its track-specific research seminar.</p> <p>The executive master's programme offers a broad spectrum of theoretical approaches and disciplines; in every track the object of study is examined from a variety of perspectives. This multidisciplinaryity is also reflected in the team of lecturers, the working methods and in the philosophy of science component, which is taught in all tracks by the same lecturers.</p> |
| 5.5.1.2 Other Components                         | <p>All course components of the programme and its three tracks are compulsory; there are no electives. Students, however, are encouraged to contribute their own case studies from their working practice to the teaching sessions and the assignments; moreover, students can choose their own research topic for the master's thesis.</p>   |
| 5.5.1.3 Structure and didactics of the programme | <p>The SVT observed that in line with the educational philosophy of the department, small-scale, motivating and intensive teaching also constitutes the core feature of the didactic approach in the executive master's programme. Teaching in this programme takes place in fixed groups of no more than 22 students, which allows to form learning communities around each track.</p> <p>An important element in the educational philosophy is the creation of an</p>   |

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|  | <p>academic community of staff and students, which is brought about by intensive personal supervision in combination with small class sizes, activating teaching methods and – in terms of an executive master’s programme - a reasonable number of contact hours.</p> <p>Students indicated to the SVT that the individual courses are feasible and the number of contact hours appropriate. The SVT observed, moreover, that the drop-out rate is low and that the majority of students graduate in time, with almost 90% of the participants finishing in less than three years.</p>  |
| 5.5.1.4 Intake                         | <p>The admission procedure for the programme is set up in such a way that the main criterion for selection is the extent to which a candidate is likely to complete the programme successfully. As a result, incoming students are rather homogeneous in terms of capacity to succeed in the programme. Moreover, the educational philosophy with its small-scale education, intensive teaching and direct contacts with staff contributes to students levelling up quite quickly, if this is needed. Hence, the drop-out rate is fairly low.</p>  |
| 5.5.2 Length                           | <p>The SVT confirms, based on the information materials and the discussion on site, that the executive master’s programme is a two-year part-time programme with each track consisting of 60 EC.</p>   |
| 5.5.3 Results                          | <p>The SVT found that, measured against the requirements of the intended learning outcomes that are set at master’s level, several theses were of rather weak quality and very near the pass/fail divide.</p> <p>The SVT concludes that the intended learning outcomes of the executive master’s programme are achieved by the end of the curriculum. It also observed that several students had difficulties in the master’s thesis to take a more distanced perspective when reflecting in abstract terms on their own organisation. In the view of the SVT, the programme may want to raise the bar for the executive master’s students and challenge them in the graduation research process to go a step further.</p> |
| 5.6 Quality Improvement and Innovation |  |
| 5.6.1 Programme accomplishment         | <p>The written materials and the discussions with enthusiastic students and alumni revealed that all participants are highly satisfied with the executive master’s programme. The executive master’s programme lives up to expectations as it allows participants to function at an academic level in their jobs, often leading to new responsibilities within their professional context. Employers are also pleased with the development of their employees and see the benefits of participating in this programme.</p>   |
| 5.6.2 Curriculum Development           | <p>According to the Self-Evaluation Report, the executive master’s programme is revised regularly and in different ways. First and foremost, students complete evaluations on each individual course, which are discussed in the Board of the Academic School (BAS) and in the Degree Programme Committee, which operates specifically for this executive master’s programme and consists of five lecturers and five students. The programme coordinators meet six times per year with the manager Consultancy &amp; Executive Masters of USG. In addition, programme coordinators and course coordinators meet informally, as well as formally in teaching staff meetings.</p>  |

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|                        | <p>The SVT gathered from its discussions that the voice of the different stakeholders is heard and that programme management takes into account as much as possible their concerns and suggestions. Moreover, the SVT observed that content-wise the programme has been adjusted in different ways over the past few years.</p>  |
| 5.6.3 External Reviews | <p>The executive master's programme has taken into account the conclusions of the previous accreditation visit (2015) by making more connection between the three programme tracks, leading to the introduction of one common course and to addressing research methods and techniques throughout the degree programme. These adjustments all seem for the better.</p> <p>The SVT does recommend the programme to consider a mid-term review, if no external reviews are planned within the next few years.</p>  |
| 5.7 Student Assessment | <p>Based on the description in the Self-Evaluation Report and the sample of tests consulted on site, the SVT thinks that the assessment system is fine. In recent years, the executive master's programme has invested in testing practices and in strengthening the principles underlying assessment: for each course, the programme has examined the connection between the course objectives and the testing formats, and made adjustments where necessary. Moreover, the SVT has come across a variety of mainly individual assessment methods (papers, essays, take-home examinations, etc.) that include proper feedback to students. The SVT observed that the programme pays sufficient attention to ensuring that assessments are valid and reliable.</p> <p>The USG department has one Board of Examiners for all its degree programmes, as well as a Testing Committee that functions as a subcommittee of the Board of Examiners. Over the years the legal position and tasks of the Board of Examiners have changed significantly. From the discussion on site with representatives of both Board and Committee, the SVT gathered that these members possess the proper capacity and expertise to perform all tasks according to the requirements set by Dutch law. The SVT also learned that the Testing Committee assessed the courses of the executive master's programme in 2013 and in 2016 and issued several recommendations to enhance the quality of assessment.</p> <p>With regard to thesis assessment, the SVT found that each thesis is evaluated and marked by two graders internal to USG who report on their evaluation on one form. The SVT observed that each thesis is assessed using an evaluation form with relevant assessment criteria. The SVT agreed in most cases with the scores given by the assessors and found that almost all evaluations were completed in an insightful way. However, the SVT observed that it was not always possible to establish how the graders arrived at the final mark because there is no direct link between the assessments of each criterion and the score, nor is there an individual weighting of these criteria or a set of decision rules. The SVT learned, however, that the Testing Committee is taking an active stance in guaranteeing the thesis quality and score, as it examines every year a thesis which has only narrowly passed.</p> |
| 5.8 Programme          | Covered in the Institutional Accreditation   |

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| Jurisdiction                            |  |
| 5.9.1 Faculty nucleus Score:            | Covered in the Institutional Accreditation.<br>According to the overview in the Self-Evaluation Report, USG staff on the executive master's programme dedicate 9.2 FTE on education for a two-year period. With 96 students per (two-year) cohort, the staff-student ratio amounts to just over 1:10.  |
| 5.9.2 Faculty qualifications            | The SVT learned that almost all lecturers combine teaching and research. The SVT considers that in terms of teaching and learning environment, the didactic concept and the staff are of good quality.   |
| 5.9.3 Diversity: gender and minorities  | The SVT considers that diversity is on the radar of the department and the programme. It welcomes the initiatives taken so far on this issue and encourages all responsible bodies to step up their efforts. The SVT suggests in particular that the programme explores further opportunities to increase the international and intercultural dimensions of the curriculum.  |
| 5.10 Admission of Students              | The executive <i>master's programme</i> is a selective and small-scale programme and the admission is set up in such a way that it ensures an optimal match between student and programme. Students should hold a bachelor's or master's degree, either academic or from a university of applied sciences, and have at least four years of recent and relevant practical experience in a leadership, strategic or advisory position in the public domain.<br>When the admission committee has determined that the applicant meets the basic requirements, the student participates in the selection procedure. Candidates submit a covering letter and a CV and are invited to an intake interview with the Programme Coordinator. This interview determines whether the candidate is sufficiently motivated and meets the requirements with regard to education and work experience, notably in terms of the level of thinking and functioning. Moreover, applicants can be asked to perform a supplementary test on the level of academic thinking. The SVT gathered from the written materials and the discussion on site that this selection procedure is lengthy and comprehensive, but also effective as it allows those students to be selected that fit the programme. |
| 5.11 Supportive Services and Facilities | Covered in the Institutional Accreditation   |
| 5.12 Student Services                   | Covered in the Institutional Accreditation   |
| 5.13 Public Relations                   | Covered in the Institutional Accreditation   |
| 6 Additional Criteria                   | N.a.   |

## 2. Conclusion

Based on all material and especially the report of the NVAO-EAPAA site visit team, the Accreditation Committee has evaluated the programmes.

In conclusion: the PAOS programme is not very coherent, and misses a common core and research methods. The programme management should look into the issue of critical thinking about the own organization of the students.

**Based on the above evaluation of the specific criteria, the EAPAA Accreditation Committee concludes that this programme meets the criteria for accreditation sufficiently and can be accredited without restrictions.**