



Development report
Public Administration and Organizational Science
Utrecht University

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Introduction

From 25 to 27 September 2023, an independent peer review panel visited the Utrecht University School of Governance (USG) to assess the quality of four degree programmes: the bachelor, master, research master and executive master programmes in Public Administration and Organisation Science. During the site visit, a development dialogue was carried out in the form of thematic sessions between programme stakeholders (teaching and service staff, students, alumni, representatives of quality assurance bodies) and the panel. This development report was written based on the discussions in six thematic sessions.

Description of the thematic sessions

Theme 1: Public administration of the future in today's public administration programmes

When establishing the site visit programme, USG invited the panel to identify one development oriented topic it wanted to address with programme stakeholders. The panel suggested to investigate with programme stakeholders how the USG programmes anticipate already now on topics that will play an important role in the future professional life of the current public administration students. In this regard, the panel was also interested in finding out if and how these new topics would be addressed in possibly new and innovative forms of education.

Preparing for this session, the panel gathered from the written materials that USG and its degree programmes focus first and foremost on the link between governance and organisation, and public/societal issues. In the recent past, USG has paid particular attention to the ethical dimension of governance and organisation, and emphasised the need for moral reflection. Moreover, societal developments around diversity and inclusion, sustainability, and digitalisation took a more prominent position in the programmes.

The participants in this thematic session indicated that USG and its programmes have been addressing developments in society and will continue to do so in the future. The panel was informed that several topics such as diversity, sustainability and digitalisation have in the meantime also found their way to the research agenda of both USG and the wider university. While individual researchers had been addressing such topics in the past, their contributions are now more explicitly profiled, which in turn allows USG, the programmes and the students to capitalise on this research. The growing attention for these topics in society, in the education programmes and in the research endeavours of staff have led to an increasing number of students picking up these themes in course assignments and graduation theses. In this regard, several participants spoke in very positive terms about the "Climate Conference", which USG had organised last year for staff and students and which clearly has an impact on the number of student assignments in this domain now. All in all, the panel noticed with satisfaction that these future-oriented themes find their way into the respective degree programmes, the research undertaken at USG, and into research-based education provided by staff with a clear research profile.

The professional advisory council (*Adviesraad*) is another tool for USG to ensure that its programmes remain up to date. This council consists of alumni who are active in different sectors where public administration and organisation are key. The council was established quite recently and so far has gathered three times. The topics that were tabled at these meetings often originated from the USG development agenda and were highlighted in the self-evaluation report as issues for discussion with the panel, as well: the skills trajectory, the product thesis, new elements around digitalisation. The panel spoke with several council representatives

and noticed that the council takes its role as sounding board seriously and that the members are well chosen.

Asked by the panel what could be done differently in the future, one representative indicated that in Government circles, there is a need for graduates in public administration and organisation science who do not only know about policy design but also about policy implementation/execution. In this regard, it is important for USG graduates to not only 'take a single ticket to The Hague' but in fact be properly prepared to 'take a ticket away from The Hague' as there is a lot of relevant (policy implementation) work to do in the country.

Other council members, who are employers or providers of internships, emphasised the need for proper research skills. All graduates tend to have good basic content knowledge, which they can further deepen on the job. However, it is only at university that students get the chance to focus extensively and in a critical and analytical way on one particular topic; this experience is relevant because they will need these skills in their later job (even if there will be less room for such in-depth research).

In sum, the panel acknowledges that USG is systematically following developments in the professional field and integrates new trends and topics in its programmes, education and research. It commends USG for setting up an advisory council and advises the school to integrate the work field's input in the quality assurance loop of continuous improvement. However, the panel was struck by what it calls the 'diversity paradox': USG pays particular attention in its research to the theme of diversity, yet continues to attract a rather homogeneous group of students (and staff) to most of its programmes. Hence, if USG really wants to achieve diversity in its student and staff population, then it should revise some of its approaches regarding programme branding, communication and selection.

Theme 2: Involved in student wellbeing

In recent years, students have been experiencing more pressure than before to do well during their studies. This peer competition to perform and be successful is further enhanced through social media and the perception that we all live in uncertain times. Moreover, bonding among students is less strong now than it was before the corona lockdowns. Notwithstanding the fact that students are part of the USG 'community' and that there is an extensive (professional) support network at USG and the university, there are concerns among USG staff about student wellbeing.

The panel gathered from the materials that both the attention for student wellbeing and the services on offer have increased over the past few years. According to the programme stakeholders in this session, USG is 'struggling' with the following paradox: on the one hand the programmes are keen to offer interesting (extra-)curricular challenges to highly ambitious students, while on the other hand staff notices that it should contain/mitigate student ambitions because student wellbeing is at risk. Hence the question that teaching and service staff are putting to themselves (and the panel): what is the role of the programmes in looking after the mental state / wellbeing of their students?

The discussion with programme stakeholders in this session, but also with students from different USG programmes during the site visit have demonstrated according to the panel that there are many initiatives at programme, USG and university level to monitor student wellbeing and that students are offered many opportunities to speak out in group or individually, openly or confidentially about their wellbeing. There has always been an offer, but the activities and opportunities have definitely increased since the pandemic. Moreover, several teaching and service staff now openly discuss that "failing is an option"; in fact, by using

examples from their own career, they inform students that failing a test or an assignment should be considered as an opportunity to adjust and learn more. Similarly, staff emphasise that going abroad during the minor period can be a very rewarding experience but is not necessarily the most attractive option for all students; hence, students who do not feel like going abroad may benefit equally well from a minor at another Dutch university.

The panel welcomed the recent initiative for a student “confidante” – a low threshold contact / junior staff member not linked to any of the USG programmes who offers a “listening ear” and can advise students to seek (professional) support.

Students in this and other sessions indicated that they are aware of the opportunities and that they are making use of these services when they need it. Students did mention, though, that there would be room for communicating the wellbeing initiatives and services even more to international students. Teaching and service staff agreed that international students had been particularly vulnerable during the lockdowns, and could do with some further dedicated attention.

According to the panel, wellbeing should not be limited to students but also concern staff. Staff indicated very clearly that they have chosen to work at USG because of the small-scale intensive education environment with small groups and many student and staff contacts. As one participant mentioned: “you need a big education heart if you work here.” During the session staff provided examples of how colleagues, USG and the university are looking after their wellbeing. In this regard, they appreciated the initiative by USG to hold a workshop led by specialised professionals in the aftermath of the student suicides. While student wellbeing is a particular point of attention at USG, the panel was informed that it does not increase the workload for staff. As they teach in small groups, staff see which students are doing well and which students are getting lost. In the latter case, staff know how to set the first step towards the students, but are never asked to provide support that goes beyond their own professional expertise.

In sum, the panel understands that small-scale intensive education with an ambitious group of highly qualified students may increase the pressure among students and eventually impact on their wellbeing. This and other discussions during the site visit have demonstrated according to the panel that USG and its teaching and service staff address the issue comprehensively, properly, and to the satisfaction of the students. Hence, the panel welcomes on the one hand the concern of the staff for the wellbeing of their students but considers on the other hand that the current set of student wellbeing initiatives are such that they allow to offer students an ambitious and challenging study period. Moreover, the panel thinks highly of the way USG staff reflected on its own wellbeing. In addition to all positive findings and considerations, the panel does advise USG to enhance communication on the wellbeing offer towards its international students.

Theme 3: Preparing students for their contribution to solving public issues

USG trains people to help solving public issues based on their academic knowledge and reflection about governance and organisation. To this effect, students acquire competences in three domains: content knowledge, research and professional skills. According to USG, the connection between contents and skills, and the link between theory and practice are key strengths of its programmes. In this session, the panel was invited to discuss the balance between knowledge, skills and practice, and to identify pitfalls and/or opportunities.

Preparing for this session, the panel gathered from the materials that there is ample attention to knowledge, skills and professional practice in all four degree programmes under review. However, the balance between

these components and the way they take up a self-standing or integrated way in the respective curricula are different.

During the session, the panel discussed both the comprehensive offer of social and professional skills, which are integrated in several courses of the bachelor programme, and the range of academic and professional skills of which students pick two in the master programme. The panel acknowledges the relevance of both schemes and thinks that in both programmes the skills component is not only a value added for the students but also contributes to realising the educational vision of USG.

While the panel very much subscribes to the way the social and professional skills are integrated in the bachelor curriculum, it has some doubts as to whether academic and social skills should take up a quarter of the entire 60 EC master programme. Following the discussion in this and other sessions, the panel suggests USG to reconsider the current balance of 22.5 EC of content knowledge, 22.5 EC of research (methods and thesis), and 15 EC of skills. Instead, the programme may want to consider integrating the academic and professional skills component with the content knowledge, thereby paying specific attention to research skills and 'freeing' credits to offer one more content course. After all, the master degree programme consists of eight different programmes with their own scope and student cohort composition.

Theme 4: Development of assessment

USG is confident that it relies on a robust system of assessment, which is implemented properly in the different courses and the thesis of the respective programmes. Nonetheless, this rather traditional system of assessment also has some disadvantages according to USG as students may only focus on passing the test or assignment rather than learning from it. Moreover, it is UU-wide policy to inform students not only about their individual scores but also indicate the average and median score of each test, which may affect student wellbeing if they do not score well.

Preparing for the site visit, the panel reviewed a sample of thesis evaluations for each programme and found that thesis evaluation was organised and implemented in an exemplary way: in almost all cases the panel thought that the final score of the thesis was in line with its own appreciation and that the thesis evaluation forms had been completed in an insightful way. In view of this thematic session, the panel was informed that USG is considering two alternatives in terms of assessment: (i) replacing scores by pass/fail decisions with development feedback, and (ii) programmatic assessment.

Programme stakeholders indicated during the session that they are looking for a balanced approach in their assessment methods, to ensure that students focus on the long-term learning experience in their study rather than aiming to meet only short-term goals (i.e. pass an exam). Focusing on the learning experience would also enhance student wellbeing. According to the panel, focusing on the long-term learning experience of students requires programmes and courses to revisit their assessments models by constructively aligning course goals and programme outcomes with exam questions and by providing formative feedback. This is certainly a path worth investigating/pursuing, provided it is done so for the right reasons. In fact, the panel gathered from this and other sessions (notably with students) that assessment as it is conceived now may cause some temporary stress among students but is not jeopardising student wellbeing. Hence, changing the assessment approach systematically could be relevant if it is pursued for educational/didactical reasons.

At the level of individual courses and assessments, students indicated that some assignments could be assessed by a pass/fail: in fact, students think it is appropriate to get a score on a written knowledge-

oriented test, while skills reflection reports could do with a pass/fail and feedback. The panel agrees to this suggestion yet advises USG to also keep an eye on the format of the reflection assignments. In fact students did not seem to understand the relevance of each and every reflection assignment. In order to avoid creating “reflective zombies”, it is important that students learn how to reflect, and that the formats for their reflection are not too elaborate nor the accompanying assessment rubrics too strict. Moreover, the panel advises USG to also keep an eye on the format of the reflection assignments.

Similarly, the panel welcomes the recent initiative to pilot so-called product theses in the master programme. However, in order for such theses to constitute a real alternative graduation product – the few examples the panel looked at were basically not that different from the reviewed thesis sample - the learning goals and assessment criteria should be adjusted.

Talking about the long-term learning experience of students, the panel mentioned during the session that for the master thesis, USG may want to consider paying more attention in its evaluation to the thesis process instead of focusing almost solely on the master thesis product. This suggestion applies to all forms for master graduation products the programme may want to envisage in the future.

In sum, the panel thinks highly of the existing assessment system at USG yet sees room for more development-oriented assessment methods. This will require a revision of the course goals and exam criteria. While the panel thinks that the current assessment system is not too demanding in terms of student wellbeing, it is clear that any alternative approach should not increase the overall workload. The panel advises USG to look at approaches outside the school and to make use of the assessment expertise that is available within the university. At the same time it is important to involve USG students in setting up the new assessment formats. Finally, the panel advises USG to set a deadline for investigating assessment options, as well as a concrete date for decision-making and implementation.

Theme 5: Development of executive programmes

Currently, the executive master degree programme consists of three programmes with their own scope and curricular set-up. USG’s development agenda mentions the intention to have a more unified curriculum structure for the three programmes, including some common courses and electives that are open to all participants. This in turn would offer students more freedom to tailor their executive programme to their own liking.

Preparing for this session, the panel gathered from the materials that currently the three programmes are very different in their set-up, each attracting a somewhat different audience in terms of both profile and number. By streamlining the set-up of the three two-year part-time programmes, students would follow content courses, research methodology classes, professional development skills and work on their thesis more or less during the same periods of the year.

Staff and students indicated during the session that a more common curriculum set-up brings only advantages for the students as this would potentially enlarge the pool of courses every executive master student could benefit from. This in turn could do away with what some students mentioned as a disadvantage of the current programmes, i.e. that the courses tend to be quite broad with little room for in-depth investigation of specific themes.

While students see the benefit of a more tailored curriculum with individualised study programmes, they also emphasised that the cohort feeling is an important feature of the current programmes that they

definitely want to keep. After all, students have enrolled for one specific programme and are likely to do so in the future, as well. Hence, while they see value added in one or two common courses across the two-year programme, students find it particularly enriching to exchange ideas within their cohort of likeminded individuals with a different professional background yet a common goal.

The panel welcomes the idea of a more unified curriculum set-up and endorses both the strengths and potential pitfalls of this new approach. Listening to staff and students, the panel understands that it is important for USG to maintain the individual ‘colour’ of each programme. Originally, the programmes were quite different from each other; the new approach should maintain this individual ‘colour’ while also offering room for interaction via (a limited set of) common courses, (a few) electives and (some) course components such as working visits that are opened up to interested students from other programmes.

In sum, the panel thinks positively about the envisaged changes and suggests that USG does not wait too long before the plans are implemented for all three programmes. The panel advises USG and the programme teams to pay sufficient attention in the preparation phase to the educational/didactical aspects of the changes, i.e. that there is alignment between the learning outcomes at programme level and the learning goals at course level, and that students who want to tailor their study programme can eventually demonstrate all learning outcomes.

Theme 6: Scope and format of the thesis in the executive master programme

The final session concerns the plans of USG to change the scope and format of the executive master thesis. Instead of one comprehensive final product, the programme envisages two separate products that together cover the different elements in the research process: a theoretical study about a practical problem in the student’s workplace, and an empirical study on a theme suggested by the programme.

Preparing for this session, the panel gathered from the materials that this approach is expected to align even more with the educational vision of the USG programmes, i.e. to train people to help solving public issues based on their academic knowledge and reflection about governance and organisation. Moreover, the new approach should connect better with the day-to-day practice of the students-professionals and strengthen the link between professional practice and academic reflection.

During the session, several staff emphasised the relevance of the two graduation products for the professional practice of the executive master students; they also pointed to the enormous workload for students to produce one comprehensive master thesis at the very end of their study when they also have family and work obligations. Students and alumni from their side provided a mixed picture: some preferred the ‘old’ approach as they wanted to prove that they were able to accomplish a ‘master work’ on a topic of their interest; others welcomed the ‘new’ approach because it would be more in line with what they do at work and would mitigate the pressure/workload of a master thesis.

Having heard the different viewpoints, the panel was somewhat surprised that there were many motivations for changing the executive master thesis (alignment with educational vision, link with professional practice of students, assumed study load), but that didactics or the need for students to leave their professional comfort zone were not mentioned. While the panel is in principle not against the new thesis approach, the envisaged change should be based on robust motives such as the value added of the change for educational/didactic purposes and/or the need for students to go out of their comfort zone and produce part of the thesis outside their own working environment. With regard to the latter, the panel had noticed in its

sample review of executive master theses that some students seemed to experience difficulties in taking a step back and reflecting on their own professional environment.

In sum, the panel welcomes the programme's initiative to reconsider the master thesis approach. This idea, however, is not yet fully thought through and requires further consideration. The panel advises USG and the programme team to look at similar initiatives within and outside the university, and to eventually take a decision that is based on a compelling motivation. If USG would go ahead with two thesis products, then it should also revise the learning goals and the evaluation criteria/forms of the respective products, and ensure that together they align with the overall executive master programme objectives.