

## Development report Human Geography and Planning Utrecht University

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From 18 to 20 June 2025, an independent peer review panel visited the Faculty of Geosciences at Utrecht University to assess the quality of five degree programmes: BSc Sociale Geografie en Planologie, MSc Spatial Planning, MSc International Development Studies, MSc Urban and Economic Geography, and joint MSc Geographical Information Systems and Applications. During the site visit, a development dialogue was organized 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 three thematic sessions, which cover overarching topics that are relevant for all programmes and were identified based on the SWOT+A analysis in the visitation dossier.

### Anticipating the future with (generative) AI in geography and planning

The rapid rise of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT and their widespread use have important implications for how we organize education and assessments. This session focuses on the implications of the rise and availability of such tools for the field of geography and planning, which is reflected in the knowledge base and affects the skills base. The discussion, which was organised as a plenary session for all participants, started from two questions: which skills to address in our curricula, and are there already good practice examples? What follows is an inventory of the input from the participants.

#### *What do we address in our courses?*

- We use AI modelling in course, which has a lot of potential
- In Medical Science faculties they use AI persona as patients to train students. At Geosciences we could do something similar to train students in interviewing: produce personas and assign them different characteristics
- We might use AI-avatars and assign them stakeholder roles such as decision makers.
- Get stakeholders virtually in the classroom
- One student studied as a graduation project how to develop AI to support the planning process.
- Other students used AI in neighbouring audits to collect information such as street images for their master thesis in a straightforward way
- One programme on geoinformatics discusses with students how generative AI generates codes and what the limitations of this codes is, the pro's and con's are discussed in workshops. This of course requires some basic knowledge to be able to ask the right questions.

#### *Which knowledge needs to remain?*

- The moral implications of GeoAI - ethical issues related to privacy and private data
- Foundational spatial models: LLMs with maps
- Multimodal AI – images and text, extract information from maps
- One programme teaches how to use AI for map making – also in this context, ethics is important – what are the implications of using AI for map making
- Geostatistics

- One course asks students to first write an AI essay and then their own essay reflecting on this first AI essay
- If students learn how to transcribe interviews with the support of AI, then they can spend more time on the analysis of the collected materials

#### *What do you think people need?*

- Communication skills
- Ethical skills
- Coding skills (planning for econometrics)
- Students should be able to reflect
- Students need background information to ask good-quality questions
- Students should understand the impact of AI on geography
- Being able to assess the quality of what you get as output from GenAI
- Methodological background and critical thinking, critical analysis on method and methodology
- If teachers want to decide what their students should know, then the teachers should be on top of things first. This means that teachers should take courses with students, who tend to be more advanced.

#### *Question to representatives of the professional field: what is the desired profile when hiring new colleagues?*

- Any (new) colleague should have analytical skills: logical thinking should be the basis of what you teach in a disciplinary field
- Writing skills: bad writing skills means bad thinking skills

#### *Building a strong academic community with self-regulated learners*

We strive towards a closely knit academic community where students and staff feel invited to develop themselves. Such community has an important role as a source of learning, inspiration and development. IT is challenging to build an academic community as it requires frequent encounters and commitment. In recent years we identified several bottlenecks in all programmes to creating such community. Moreover, self-regulated learning as an element of student behaviour is not a given, and several students show limited engagement when it comes to course and non-course related issues. This raises the question whether such an academic community is feasible after all. Should we reconsider our conceptualization of an academic community? And if so, what kind of values should we include? The session was organised in an inter-active way with participants entering into several small one-on-one discussions. What follows is an inventory of the elements that contribute to an academic community.

- students feeling like colleagues
- working with the study association
- community building must be recognised as work – structural support
- informal / non-structural encounters with staff and students
- exchange of ideas
- non-hierarchical
- facilitate encounters
- physical location of a programme (ideally combining research and education)
- environment breathing the atmosphere of a department
- shared space outside where students and teachers meet informally
- feedback and counselling should preferably be organised in-person, not online
- an academic community provides energy
- recognition and reward

- intellectual challenge
- motivating
- gives people insight
- organise events focused not only on content but on getting to know each other
- Informal joint activities
- joint onboarding, also for new staff
- start the academic year with a group event for all programmes
- co-creating a module enhances ownership
- field trips allow for joint experiences, for togetherness
- attending conferences together is consuming and costly but also offers 'networking' time

#### Handling data and people with care

The traditionally strong empirical-analytical basis of our programmes, current technological developments, and open science principles require a change in how we train our students on the use, analysis, and management of data. Students are not always aware of the issues at stake: they share data with GenAI tools, consider it difficult to think thoroughly about their ethical positioning, and do not always adhere to the main rules regarding privacy. In this thematic session, we discuss how we can better prepare our students for a world in which data represent many opportunities but also risks. How to prevent ethical guidelines from becoming box-ticking exercises and consider ethics more broadly? What are effective ways to teach research ethics in a quickly changing world? The session was organised in small group corner discussions. What follows is an inventory of the written answers to the key questions in each discussion.

#### *Does more control result in better ethics?*

- These elements do not necessarily relate
- Checklists might actually work well

#### *How can ethics be more than a checkbox?*

- Discussion
- Reflection
- Create ownership – link to professionals
- Understand your values

#### *Gen Z – do our students think differently about data privacy?*

- No difference
- It is important to consider consciously what you share through which platform

#### *How can data management be more than an afterthought in student work?*

- Lots of standards exist but are not yet taught to students

#### *How can we avoid over-researching particular areas by students?*

- Synthetic populations
- Observations instead of interviews
- Digital twins
- Re-use data
- Replication studies
- Try a different logic of comparison: not focusing on the usual suspects is interesting

*How can students give back to community what they study?*

- Participatory action research
- Move up the ladder of participation
- Co-creation and having a say over the data
- Curate actions
- Be visible in the city
- Ownership/agency