

**NVAO business programmes cluster,
Thursday May 15 2025, 10.00 – 12.00**

Attendees

Panel: dr. Eric Dooms and prof. dr. Johanna Vanderstraeten.

SBE: prof. dr. Mirella Kleijnen, prof. dr. Bas Bosma, dr. Michiel van Drunen, dr. Ingmar Leijen, prof. dr. Jos Akkermans, dr. Mark Boons, dr. Susanne Beijer, dr. Markus Leitner, dr. Agnes Bäker, dr. Kathleen Stephenson, dr. Saeed Khanagha, dr. Neil Thompson, prof. dr. Bart van den Hooff, dr. Marco van Gelderen, dr. Maura Soekijad, Karlijn Snel MSc (notes) and drs. Marjolein Paap (notes).

Before the meeting it was decided to cover two topics: one about the thesis as final product and the other on the learning pathways for 'Self-Awareness' and 'Broadening Your Horizon'. Both topics and an introduction (see below) were shared before the meeting with all attendees.

Discussion Topic 1: Thesis as Final Product and Potential Alternatives

Topic introduction by SBE: Traditionally, the thesis has been the go-to as a final project for showcasing a student's expertise and assessing their academic skills (often combined with other relevant skills). There are a number of reasons that cause us to rethink whether or not to retain the thesis as the final project:

- *The rapid development of genAI and its impact on the thesis;*
- *The intensive and time-consuming process;*
- *The alignment with other goals beyond an academic career (from a labor market and student perspective).*

Alternatives could be capstone projects, portfolios, shorter research papers, professional practice experiences, or creative works. Potentially, these options could better match industry needs and highlight a student's skills and creativity. We should note that while our initial discussions are likely to be focused on the BSc thesis, we would like to use this discussion as an opportunity to think out of the box, and also include the MSc thesis. Questions asked in considering these alternatives are:

- *Would alternative end works than theses be acceptable by peers, the industry, PhD programmes (and would this differ for BSc versus MSc programs)?*
- *To what extent do you think that the curricula need to be adapted if the thesis is replaced by e.g. a different research assignment and a portfolio?*
- *How to ensure these alternatives meet academic standards and how to assess their quality?*
- *What is needed for faculty in regards to training or resource allocation if alternatives would be implemented?*
- *How to successfully supervise such an alternative?*

Our goal is to explore how we can integrate these alternatives into the curriculum while maintaining academic rigor and supporting students' career aspirations.

According to NVAO standards every programme should have a final project, but that does not have to be a thesis. Faculty are used to it, and it is handy during an accreditation, but given current developments the incentives and initiatives to think about alternatives are growing.

One of the panel members is in favour of an alternative for the bachelor's thesis. During the accreditation process the panel looked at the thesis as a "proof of the pudding", but that could also be done with another product. Alternatives could be other research-based end projects, like a portfolio with multiple products, applied research, a reflection document or a research note. The panel member shares the example that they moved to a consultancy project/capstone in an MBA programme, MSc accredited, which is a rigorous applied project. Before the project students are prepared for this, for example on academic writing and analytical and problem-solving skills. The academic part is part of the project, but even more in an academic reflection paper about the academic decisions made. The data research should be rigorous as well. In the past the academic staff also experienced that students had not incorporated the learning lines in the programme and only during the thesis they really learned that. The staff tried to build in some of the skills in the courses before the final project, so students are better prepared during the project and have already incorporated what they have learned during courses.

One of the reactions is that splitting it up does not solve the problems with genAI and that it does not sound as more efficient than the thesis. The panel member acknowledges that it is a coordination challenge. Another challenge with using more consultancy or practice-oriented projects is to involve enough external organisations.

The other panel member looked at the bachelor thesis at the own institute knowing that bachelor's students often still have to further develop their academic research skills. It is therefore important to learn them doing this. The bachelor's thesis process was simplified: they make groups of students, and students give each other feedback based on a format and in the presence of the lecturer. During the bachelor's programme students need a rigorous structure in the thesis process to get to a good result. In the master final project it is easier to move to industry relations, because by then, the students are more experienced with doing academic research.

SBE staff shares that they experience that students really love the thesis process, that they learn a lot and love being part of research. A SBE lecturer works close together with the master's students, which diminishes the risk of genAI. There is consensus that combining supervising a master's thesis with own research works well and is motivating both for the academic staff as for the student. There are differences between bachelor's and master's theses, but there is agreement that the old shoes should not be thrown away too early. Some advocate that whatever will be introduced the end project should be individual or have at least an important individual component that can assess the learnings at the level of an individual student.

At SBE there are also experiences that during the bachelor's thesis process not all students have acquired all skills necessary. Using peer feedback sometimes leads to the deaf guiding the blind. The experience was that student teams worked out for better writing quality, but not for the academic skills. The panel member reacts that in the given example the students do not give feedback on what is written, but in the first session on the validity of the methodology chosen for the research question. In second session the building blocks of solving the research question are evaluated. Only in the third session there is written work of the students, but the feedback should be on the contents not the writing. This means that the writing of the students is postponed to later in the process.

Bachelor's theses have limitations for students and the programme, so one should think about the ambition level of the bachelor's thesis. Does (or should) a student using quantitative skills in the thesis also have the right level of qualitative skills? If yes, then it can be good to make sure that they have the skills before starting the thesis. Also the supervisor should be aware of the ambition level of a bachelor's thesis. That is another challenge that entered the academic field with the start of a bachelor's and master's thesis. Most programmes seen during the accreditation work with tight time schedules. There are still programmes that opt for a more relaxed approach, where some students use months to write a thesis. The tight schedule helps students to complete the thesis on time, but the question remains whether this gives them the learning process you want them to learn to deal with (like they would experience when they have to deal with, e.g., academic struggles).

Keeping an eye on the thesis at vocational institutions in the discussions is a valid point. Another Dutch university chose for a capstone project in the master and chose to go back to a thesis in the bachelor, because the capstone was very applied and students should still learn critical thinking which is the purpose of academic teaching.

On the question if there are changes visible in how the NVAO looks at the thesis and related developments, the panel reacts that there should be a good story and evidence that the programme realizes the intended learning outcomes. A thesis still seems to be the norm and most programmes in this accreditation cluster had a thesis. This topic is part of an ongoing discussion and is discussed at the VU and at a national level. The discussion at a national level hopefully helps to also get the NVAO to a next step.

The discussion focused more on the process, but does not answer the more fundamental change how student learning is changing based on the genAI developments. Programmatic assessment is seen as an answer, for example in medicine, but is less usable for business and economic programmes. One panel member advises to discuss what you experience with students using genAI, for example that the products look more the same. This makes students aware that using genAI has a negative effect on their creative thinking.

Discussion Topic 2: Learning Pathways for 'Self-Awareness' and 'Broadening Your Horizon'

Topic introduction by SBE: We want to explore how to integrate the learning outcomes of 'self-awareness' and 'broadening your horizon' more effectively into our educational pathways. 'Self-awareness' involves understanding one's strengths, weaknesses, values, and impact on others, which is crucial for personal and professional growth. 'Broadening your horizon' encourages students to expand their perspectives, embrace diversity, and develop a global outlook. In collaboration with different partners on campus, we are already actively engaged in the development and implementation of initiatives such as "The Mixed Classroom". However, to strengthen our positioning and to provide more guidance to our staff and students alike, we are continuously improving to make these learning pathways more tangible.

- *What methods can be used to embed the learning pathways in the programmes more effectively?*
- *Which methods are already successfully used?*
- *What assessment methods are applicable to these learning pathways?*

- *How to get continuous feedback from students on these learning pathways and what would help them with achieving the learning outcomes?*

Our goal is to create meaningful learning experiences that foster self-awareness and broaden students' horizons, preparing them for diverse and dynamic environments.

One of the panel members gives the example of organizing an on campus international week, which can focus on a specific topic relevant to each student, such as sustainability. During this week, students from the university and from international partner universities jointly receive lectures and seminars from international (guest) lecturers and speakers, and get together to work on a topic and assess themselves as global citizens. This week is organized in one of the universities in Belgium and gets a lot of positive feedback from students and lecturers involved. It is an added value to the programmes when it comes to broadening students' horizons and effectively contributes to their self-awareness on global topics, while working in an international team. During this week, all bachelor students have to participate and there are no other classes.

The VU has developed *A Broader Mind* course which aims to contribute to broadening a student's horizon and their self-awareness as well. However, it is a challenge to fit it into every bachelor's programme curriculum.

The panel mentions the importance of imbedding these topics into the programme, and not adding them on top of the programme. These topics can for instance be embedded into the thesis process, but it is also important to integrate them throughout the curriculum. Personal development of students takes place from the first course until completing the thesis. A self-assessment could be added for instance, to monitor what lessons have been learned on a personal level. The challenge lies in showing that these students acquired skills from working together in diverse teams for instance. Reflecting on it is a popular method to use, but it can be quite difficult for programmes with large student numbers to do it in a sustainable manner. The learning outcomes are of a different nature than the content related learning outcomes and are more challenging to assess.

Grading is not necessary when it comes to developing students into responsible citizens, but support is very much needed throughout their education to make their journey successful.