*Development dialogue ReMa Theology and Religious Studies
11 November 2020*

**Participants**

Programme: prof. dr. Eveline van Staalduine-Sulman (programme director), prof. dr. Katja Tolstoj (programme coordinator), prof. dr. Ruard Ganzevoort (dean), Annie Chou (report)

Panel: prof. dr. Ab de Jong, prof. dr. Mark Segdwick, prof. dr. Maike Schult, Lucy Spoliar BA, dr. Jesseka Batteau

**Topics**

**1. Intake of students**

* How can we further improve our talent policy?
* How can we promote the ReMa if people do not intend to graduate?
* How to promote ReMa in the corona time?
* How to promote ReMa to students other than of Christian background?

**2. Broadening or deepening?**

* Many Christian theological issues can be studied, which is the strength of the training. We want more Buddhism and / or Islam, but that means broadening and perhaps flattening out. How do we find the right balance in this?

**3. Individual choice versus cohort formation?**

* How can we find the right balance between individual routes and cohort formation?

**4. Interreligieus Dialogue**

* How to further integrate interreligious dialogue – the unique selling point of this faculty – in the programme?

**Ad 1: Intake of students**
How do we interest students who do not plan a PhD after the ReMa and yet are very interesting to our programme?
The panel states that VU can make use of its interreligious character where people with a research degree will be needed. Research is essential for a wider variety of jobs as well. Alumni bring research skills and in-depth knowledge. VU is well placed to tap into this and clearly formulate a wide variety of career options where research is a part of the job. For instance in education, churches and religious NGO’s. Clarify the added benefit of the identity of the VU programme where religion is right in the centre; why this special characteristic helps government and policymakers understand religion better rather than a strictly observed outsider perspective.
The reality at VU has proven to be more resilient, the programme director says. Why should a master student choose a two year’s research programme instead of a one year’s master? In her view academic research is needed everywhere, being able to dig deep covering big societal issues. In that regard there is a lesson to learn from alumni operating outside the academy. What is their occupation and in what kind of organization do they work?
The dean comments that religion has become an intricate issue where governments and policy makers lack adequate knowledge or capacity to investigate further. Governments applaud us that we have the network and can tap into the traditions itself. In the future the VU wants to strengthen this programme for people who are not affiliated or those who do not find that personally relevant for their studies. The question here is, do we need to make changes in the programme to target the last group specifically?
The panel does not support this idea. ReMa almost entirely overlaps the one year’s master as it is. Adding for example government aspects would give the programme more direct relevance, but it would be a terrible loss should you downsize offerings in biblical studies.
The site visit made it explicit that a career outside academia was possible after ReMa. Make this and the presence of alumni more visible. Don’t change the actual content of the programme, but give a positive framing to alumni who did not pursue a PhD and doing relevant work.

The panel notices that the location of the internships can be more diverse. But if you move away from research internships, the next panel will probably criticize you. Continuation will not prepare students for the job market other than PhD. The dean states that many internships within the academic research teams do not necessarily lead towards a PhD.
Creating internships at policy research bureaus could be a next step to cater to different study goals. Other research master programmes offer options to write policy papers and do policy research.
Bringing alumni back into the community (Bachelor, Master and Research) is extremely important in helping students find internships or ideas about careers and job. VU’s alumni officer is a professional approach to this.

**Ad 2: Broadening or deepening and ad 3: Individual choice versus cohort formation**
Various disciplines, methodologies and different topics come together in the programme. Bringing together these disciplines and reflecting on the respective projects is a merit.
Looking at other countries, in Germany the trauma topic is embedded in a Master programme where people from different working fields study theology. The panel suggests organising summer schools and/or teacher exchanges to compare situations in different (West European) countries which might stimulate research interest. There might be a benefit in larger and more structural terms. VU has a well-maintained network of likeminded academic institutions. The world leading scholars in the biblical studies have vast international networks to offer students. This should be feasible for VU to accommodate.
Cohort formation is not easy. To outsiders the relation between seminaries and the core theological programme is very difficult to figure out as it has a fragmenting effect. Hermeneutics runs as a thread throughout the whole year and can function as a cohort.
Regular meetings with a mentor can help to establish a sense of community and continuity which has no particular focus on the curriculum. Student mentors or group mentors are a great tool to help create an informal setting. A common room where students and teachers can meet each other informally at campus can also help. At a professional level, PhD students could be invited to teach research skill courses and research master students could be introduced in the research teams and function as junior staff member. The programme director agrees that these are useful advises and many of them have already been embedded in the programme.

When first introduced in the Research Master, the fear was that Islam and Buddhist courses would disintegrate the established programme that derives from a Christian background.
The panel thinks a way to appeal students with a non-Christian background is the fact that the VU and research master is a safe space for people of faith. European Muslims see the state universities in Europe as anything but safe. Promoting the programme and university as such where convictions will be respected and not challenged will attract students of non-Christian background. Another way might be bringing somebody in with a certain following. Someone who completely works outside the framework, with a good reputation and following.
Looking at the curriculum, the research master is a predominantly Christian-theologically focused programme. The panel thinks that a student from a Muslim or Buddhist background needs a programme that gives more of an insider perspective and a further specialisation of Islam or Buddhism, to make them feel an equal part in the dialogue.
Given the limited resources of budget and teachers, what is possible in offering for example specialised Islamic study courses? A bigger question is: how to integrate Muslims after a research master in existing structures in Europe? There are only a few career possibilities.
The panel understands that the most Buddhist students at VU are Dutch Buddhist, a reshaped form of Buddhism that suits the west. The valid and unique selling point of VU as an institution is the safe space it provides to the community. The VU aims to make this also a brave and challenging space. This is already taking place in our curriculum. In all of the Research Skills-related courses (i.e. Academic Writing, Academic Presenting, Research Design 1 & 2) students are met with critique from their peers on each other’s thinking, formal logics and argumentation. Being brave in opening up one’s own academic and personal convictions and feeling safe in doing this results in a successful learning environment.

**Ad 4 Interreligious Dialogue**
Interreligious discussion, started in Hermeneutics course, carries on in discussions and meetings throughout the programme. It is VU’s major selling point. The panel wonders how this could be further integrated and labelled.
In practice, a wider variety of the students’ religious background in the research master is contributing to the depth of the interreligious dialogue. The price of the path VU has paved is that students are not able to study religion from a radical outsider perspective. The panel suggests an explicit dialogue: How do people of faith talk to a secular world? To this end some explicit steps have been set already, e.g. the Methodological Assignment + a Bonus Assignment of Classics 2 class that regarded the dialogue between theology and religious studies. This will be taken further by one of the Research Groups on Theology & Science and during the FRT monthly Faculty Conversations.