

**POLITICAL SCIENCE**  
**IN THE NETHERLANDS**  
**REFLECTIONS ON THE STATE OF THE ART**

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## INTRODUCTION

International comparisons are useful in an increasingly internationalized higher education environment. Therefore, this report takes stock of the state of Dutch political science education from a comparative perspective. It outlines both the common foundations and the unique features of the Dutch political science programs, as well as the systematic use of assessment for the purpose of program innovation and improvement. The panel evaluated these features and made specific comparisons with political science education in the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and Flanders. Its conclusion suggests that the Dutch universities might use these comparisons to position themselves as an attractive option for an increasingly international student audience.

The four Dutch universities that offer bachelor's and master's degrees in political science are Leiden University, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU Amsterdam), Radboud University Nijmegen, and the University of Amsterdam. The panel visited these four universities as part of the NVAO cluster assessment political science aimed at reaccreditation of the educational programs, and was invited to reflect on the Dutch state of the art in political science education. Several other universities offer closely related programs, most of which are interdisciplinary. These programs are not included in this report.

The panel wishes to express its gratitude for the enthusiastic support, hospitality, and efficient cooperation encountered at the four universities visited during the period of review. It sincerely appreciated the openness of the information provided before the site visit and the frank nature of the various discussions with all staff members during the site visits. It hopes that the present reflection on the state of the art of political science education in the Netherlands will assist the universities in their continuing efforts to foster a culture of international quality, exchange, openness, and inclusiveness.



Prof. dr. Marijke Breuning  
Panel chair

This report was finalized on 16 May 2018



## THE NVAO ASSESSMENT POLITICAL SCIENCE

In 2017, nine political science programs at both the bachelor's and master's level were assessed at Leiden University, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU Amsterdam), Radboud University Nijmegen, and the University of Amsterdam. This cluster assessment was aimed at reaccreditation of these programs by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). A tenth program, the Erasmus Mundus master's program in Public Policy at the International Institute of Social Studies at Erasmus University Rotterdam was also assessed as part of this cluster. A panel of international peer reviewers was installed by the participating programs to perform these assessments. These panel assessments have now been finalized, and the findings presented as recommendations to the NVAO.

In addition, the NVAO assessment panel was asked to review the state of the art of political science education in the Netherlands at the four disciplinary political science programs at Leiden University, VU Amsterdam, Radboud University Nijmegen, and the University of Amsterdam in an international comparative approach. Due to its interdisciplinary profile and unique student audience, the Erasmus Mundus master's program at the International Institute of Social Studies was not included in this reflection. The state of the art report is not part of the NVAO assessment, but an independent assignment for the benefit of the four participating universities with disciplinary political science programs. Thus, the panel used terms of reference as agreed upon by the four universities.

### Composition of the NVAO Assessment Panel

- Prof. dr. Marijke Breuning, Professor of Political Sciences, Department of Political Science, University of North Texas in Denton, Texas, USA (chair);
- Prof. dr. Dirk De Bièvre, Professor of International Politics, Department of Political Sciences, Antwerp University, Belgium;
- Dr. Christien Van den Anker, Associate Professor of Politics and International Relations, Faculty of Health & Applied Sciences, University of the West of England in Bristol, UK;
- Prof. dr. Ferdi De Ville, co-director of the Centre for EU Studies, Ghent University, Belgium;
- Dr. Renske Doorenspleet, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and International Studies, University of Warwick, UK;
- Prof. dr. Peter Vermeersch, Professor of Political Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, KU Leuven, Belgium;
- Felix Wagner, bachelor student Political Sciences, Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands (student member);
- Kaisa de Bel, third-year bachelor student Political sciences and second-year bachelor student Law, Leiden University (student member).

### Working Method of the Assessment Panel for the State of the Art Report

During the site visits at the various universities for the NVAO assessment in 2017, the panel discussed unique viewpoints and impressions regarding the themes addressed in the terms of reference for the state of the art report. After the NVAO assessments were finalized, panel chair prof. dr. Marijke Breuning agreed to write the state of the art report with prof. dr. Dirk De Bièvre and dr. Christien Van den Anker on behalf of the panel, based on the formulated terms of reference mentioned below. The panel was assisted by dr. Els Schröder, NVAO secretary and project manager at QANU. The panel members agreed to acknowledge her contributions to the report by naming her the fourth author.



## Terms of Reference for the State of the Art Report

The terms of reference formulated by the four participating universities (March 2017):

*"De state of the art heeft tot doel het disciplinaire onderwijs op BSc en MSc niveau in de politicologie in NL in kaart te brengen. Het gaat daarbij primair om de vier disciplinaire politicologie opleidingen in Nederland: Nijmegen, Amsterdam (VU en UVA) en Leiden in de context van de groei van niet-strikt disciplinaire, maar wel verwante opleidingen, zoals IRIO in Groningen en European Studies in Maastricht. De positie van de Nederlandse disciplinaire opleidingen wordt – gezien de samenstelling van de commissie – in ieder geval vergeleken met Vlaanderen, de VS, en het VK en – indien mogelijk – met Duitsland en Scandinavië. De state of the art heeft primair betrekking op de inhoudelijke accenten van het politicologisch onderwijs en theoretische, methodische en didactische keuzes. Omdat het onderzoek van de visitatiecommissie niet meer behelst dan de vraag of elke opleiding afzonderlijk voldoet aan de vier door de NVAO onderscheiden standaarden, kan de state of the art geen oordelende vergelijking (ranking) zijn tussen de vier disciplinaire politicologie opleidingen."*

This state of the art report aims to chart the disciplinary education at the bachelor's and master's levels of political science in the Netherlands. It primarily concerns the four disciplinary political science programs in the Netherlands: Radboud University Nijmegen, the University of Amsterdam, VU Amsterdam, and Leiden University, in a context of the growth of not strictly disciplinary, but related programs, such as IRIO in Groningen and European Studies in Maastricht. In view of the assessment panel's international background, the position of the Dutch disciplinary programs was to be compared with Flanders, the United States (US), and the United Kingdom (UK) and - if possible - with Germany and Scandinavia. The state of the art primarily relates to the substantive aspects of political science education and theoretical, methodical, and didactic choices. The panel was explicitly asked to avoid a ranking between the four disciplinary Dutch programs.

The panel discussed the ways in which it could operationalize these terms of reference. Based on their own experience as lecturers at international universities in the US, the UK, and Flanders, comparisons to the education landscape in those countries could easily be drawn. The panel had no experience-based knowledge of the Scandinavian situation, and any comparison would have been frivolous. A comparison with German political science education was attempted by the panel, but turned out to be too complicated and in danger of being overly simplistic. German universities in the various federal states (*Bundesländer*) offer a range of programs that could be classified as 'political science education'; often, these programs are interdisciplinary and hence could not be easily compared with the Dutch disciplinary programs. In addition, a survey of the German landscape would not have been complete without a detailed study of the Austrian, Swiss and Italian universities offering German-language programs in political science education. As a result, any comparative research based on the panel members' experiences and knowledge of the German situation turned out to be incomplete and inconsequential. Therefore, the panel decided not to use comparisons with the German political science programs.

The panel decided to write an overview in the form of an informative article. This report pays attention to the characteristics of the Dutch disciplinary political science programs against a background of the European-wide Bologna Process. It outlines both the common foundations and the unique features of these programs, as well as the systematic use of assessment for the purpose of program innovation and improvement. Attention is paid to differences in curriculum design between the universities, to the structure and sequence of bachelor's and master's programs, and to the ways in which they create a suitable study climate for international students (current and prospective). Attention is also paid to variations in approach of the disciplinary programs in comparison to two not strictly disciplinary, but related Dutch programs. The comparative international focus is on general

trends similar or different to the Dutch universities rather than offering a detailed overview of the situation in the US, the UK, and Flanders.

This report can be used to inform international students and peers of the Dutch disciplinary landscape in political science education. Dutch universities offer their students high-quality bachelor's and master's programs that compare favorably to those offered elsewhere to the extent of the panel's experience abroad. In summary, Dutch universities offer thoughtfully designed bachelor's and master's programs in political science that provide students with the knowledge and skills required for success for employment. The conclusion suggests that the four Dutch universities with disciplinary political science programs might use these comparisons to position themselves as an attractive option for an increasingly international student audience. Current bridge programs demonstrate that all four Dutch universities recognize that international students who seek entry into the Dutch master's programs have a different skill set than those students who completed the bachelor's degree at one of the Dutch universities. All four programs try to tailor to the international students' needs in this respect to bring them up to speed. However, as the universities enroll more international students, they must also be cognizant of the need to expand their understanding of the international, highly skilled labor market.





# POLITICAL SCIENCE EDUCATION IN THE NETHERLANDS: REFLECTIONS ON THE STATE OF THE ART

*Marijke Breuning, Dirk De Bièvre, Christien Van Den Anker, Els Schröder*

## Introduction

International comparisons are useful in an increasingly internationalized higher education environment. Therefore, this report takes stock of the state of Dutch political science education from a comparative perspective. We show that the Dutch universities offer their students high-quality bachelor's and master's programs that compare favorably to those offered elsewhere to the extent of our experience abroad.

Political science bachelor's and master's degrees are offered at four universities in the Netherlands. This report outlines both the common foundations and the unique features of these programs, as well as the systematic use of assessment for the purpose of program innovation and improvement. It evaluates these features and makes specific comparisons with political science education in the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and Flanders. The US and the UK have an educational policy and governance structure emphasizing devolution, which means there are important differences between locations; our focus is on general trends similar or different to the Dutch universities rather than a detailed overview of the US and the UK situation. The focus on Flanders rather than Belgium as a whole is a function of the structure of higher education in Belgium; the French language part of Belgium is governed differently, and the curriculum structure within the French-language universities differs accordingly. The conclusion suggests that the Dutch universities might use these comparisons to position themselves as an attractive option for an increasingly international student audience.

## Purposeful Curriculum Design and Development

Dutch political science education at the bachelor's and master's level is characterized by structured and sequenced programs that are designed to achieve explicitly articulated outcomes. These programs have not emerged in a vacuum; they are a response to recommendations regarding "best practices" for higher education, as well as various political influences. The Dutch bachelor's and master's programs distinguish themselves through their purposeful design.

Recommendations for a purposefully structured political science curriculum that contributes not only to expertise in the discipline but also to competency in transferable skills have been around for several decades (e.g., Wahlke 1991). However, the Bologna Process has prompted European higher education to take such recommendations far more seriously than has been the case in the US, where political science education remains dominated by relatively loosely structured bachelor's degree programs (Breuning et al 2001; Ishiyama 2005; Adelman 2008; Gaston 2008; AACU 2017; Szarejko and Carnes 2018). Thus, in comparison to political science education in the US, the Dutch programs are far more structured. Although the various countries that participate in the Bologna Process differ in the extent to which they have adapted their programs, all have been influenced by the qualification frameworks that are associated with it (Adelman 2008).

Students in the four Flemish political science programs at the Universities of Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent, and Leuven receive an education that has more in common with the US model than with the Dutch one. While the four programs in the Netherlands provide students with an in-depth familiarity with the discipline of political science, students in the Flemish programs are offered a more generalist curriculum in the social sciences. Flemish students complete courses in several social science disciplines, such as sociology, communication sciences, history, economics, and philosophy, in addition to their training in political science and its various subfields.

In the UK, undergraduate programs also emphasize general exposure to the social sciences more than is the case in the Netherlands. Undergraduate programs in politics generally contain the subfields of the discipline – as required by the European agreements. Yet, in a fair number of British universities, there is also a multidisciplinary background course in the first year of the course of study leading to a bachelor's degree in politics. In other words, the bachelor's curriculum in the UK also



leaves room for a more general social science component often co-taught between different subject groups.

## Debates about Higher Education

Dutch political science education at the bachelor's and master's level has been influenced by the Europe-wide Bologna Process, which has led to the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Currently, not only the Netherlands, but also Flanders, the UK, and others (48 countries in all) participate in this endeavor to make their higher education systems more compatible with one another in order to facilitate the mobility of highly skilled labor (EHEA 2017). The Bologna Process not only intends to make it easier for students to find employment anywhere in Europe upon graduation, but also facilitates their mobility by creating common structures for degree programs (the bachelor's and master's), a common credit system (the European Credit Transfer System or ECTS), and shared outcome statements (the Dublin Descriptors). Additionally, the Bologna Process has sought to strengthen quality assurance mechanisms (EHEA 2017).

It is noteworthy that the Bologna Process relies on so-called "soft law," which means that it does not rely on European-level legislation but on standard-setting that results in action at the national and institutional levels (Reinalda 2008a, 2008b). As a result, it is to be expected that not all participants in the Bologna Process have made equal progress in adapting their university systems to these Europe-wide agreements. Indeed, there is significant debate in some countries about the merits of the Bologna Process (Meny 2008; Grove 2012; Pechar 2012; Scott 2012).

The Dutch political science programs have made important strides in adapting their curricula to these Europe-wide agreements. They have done so, in part, because their continued accreditation requires that they meet the stringent standards imposed by the national accreditation agency, Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatie Organisatie (NVAO, the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders), which has adopted standards that are in line with the Bologna Process. Although this accreditation system provides a strong incentive, the Dutch political science programs clearly endeavor to do more than simply satisfy the NVAO. At each university, the bachelor's and master's programs are both structured and sequenced, with a clear view of the competences to which the program should lead. The purposes of this structure and the intended outcomes of the programs are clearly communicated to students. Internal mechanisms suggest that each university carefully safeguards the quality of the education it offers.

The European standards agreed upon through the Bologna Process address both the length and content of political science programs, as described by Reinalda (2008a, 2008b). First, the bachelor's degree program should encompass 180 credits in the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). At the master's level, all Dutch programs consist of 60 credits, the equivalent of a one-year program. Traditionally, Dutch universities and employers regarded a student's college education to be complete only after attainment of the master's degree (or equivalent). Hence, most students enroll in a one-year master's program upon completion of their bachelor's degree.

The ECTS was originally designed to facilitate credit transfer between European universities and predates the Bologna Process (Roper 2007; Adelman 2008). It is now also used as a credit accumulation system in the EHEA. The credits associated with the ECTS are called European Credits or EC.

Roper (2007) explains that the system works differently from the US credit system. The latter is based on "contact hours," generally measured in terms of the number of hours per week a course meets. In contrast, the ECTS estimates the average time it takes to achieve required learning outcomes. This means that the ECTS is based on estimates of the time spent outside the classroom on tasks such as reading, writing, studying, and taking exams as well as the time spent in class. The Dutch universities state explicitly that one European credit (EC) requires about 28 hours of study to complete.<sup>1</sup> Students are expected to complete the bachelor's degree of 180 EC in three years, completing 60 credits annually or 30 per semester. Given that the full semester is twenty weeks

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<sup>1</sup> See, Radboud University Nijmegen at: <http://www.ru.nl/opleidingen/bachelor/politicologie/studieprogramma/>; the University of Amsterdam at: <http://www.uva.nl/programmas/bachelors/politicologie/studieprogramma/studieprogramma.html>; or the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam at: <https://bachelors.vu.nl/nl/opleidingen/politicologie/index.aspx>

long, this suggests that full-time study is estimated to be the equivalent of a 40-hour work week for the average student.<sup>2</sup> Roper (2007) notes that US universities usually translate 1 EC into ½ credit.

The European agreements that set the three-year bachelor's degree at 180 EC also determined that a minimum of 90 EC should involve political science courses. The Dutch political science bachelor's degree programs all require 180 EC, and all exceed the minimum requirement for EC in the discipline, as will be detailed below. This represents a rather stark difference to US bachelor's degrees, which typically require students to devote just 30-36 credit hours to their major discipline. The remainder of the 120 credit hours needed to earn a four-year bachelor's degree are taken up by requirements for broad exposure to the arts and sciences.

Furthermore, the European agreements specify that a bachelor's program in political science must include coursework in the following subfields: 1. political theory; 2. quantitative and qualitative methods; 3. the political system of one's own country and the European Union; 4. comparative politics; and 5. international relations (Reinalda 2008b; Nijmegen bachelor's self-study appendix). The Dutch political science bachelor's degree programs do indeed include all of these subfields. The four universities do differ in their relative emphasis on these subfields, which is a function of the expertise of their faculty and the desire to offer a unique profile.

### **Starting with Outcomes**

Dutch political science education at the bachelor's and master's level is guided by outcome statements, which are based on the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This framework was proposed in 2003, adopted in 2005, and is better known as the Dublin Descriptors. According to the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA 2014), the Dublin Descriptors are "generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities" that are associated with the completion of a bachelor's and master's degree. In other words, they are not specific to any discipline but apply generally across the disciplines.

The Dublin Descriptors are presented as competence levels and include five components: 1. Knowledge and understanding; 2. Application of knowledge and understanding; 3. Making judgments; 4. Communication; 5. Lifelong learning skills (ECA 2014). They enumerate the competence levels students are expected to have attained by the time they receive their bachelor's or master's degree.<sup>3</sup>

In the Netherlands, these generic descriptors were adapted to political science through a process of consultation. This process was informed by agreements made by the European Conference of National Political Science Associations in 2003 and involved discussions in the context of the Landelijk Overleg Opleidingen Politicologie (LOOP, National Consultation of Political Science Programs). In other words, the Dutch political science programs adhere not only to the European agreements regarding length and content, but also to a common set of outcome statements based on the Dublin Descriptors modified specifically to the study of political science. These outcome statements guide the curriculum at all four Dutch universities that offer bachelor's and master's programs in political science. Every program is encouraged to meet the common outcome statements by drawing on its expertise, research, and educational approach. The result is an educational landscape shaped by widely shared learning objectives yet varied in the approach of political science education based on the unique profiles of the degree programs.

The outcome statements are presented in Table 1, which is organized in terms of the five components of the Dublin Descriptors. The table outlines the competence levels for each component in separate columns for the bachelor's and master's degrees. In doing so, it reveals two things: it demonstrates explicitly how the outcome statements provide discipline-specific versions of the Dublin Descriptors, and it shows explicitly how the competence levels for the master's degree build on – and are different from – those required for the bachelor's degree. It is important to note that the competence levels for each degree combine both knowledge and skills. Students are expected to acquire discipline-specific knowledge, but also learn transferable skills. The latter are skills that, while

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<sup>2</sup> This is how Leiden University describes the workload for the bachelor program, see: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/onderwijs/opleidingen/bachelor/politicologie/over-de-opleiding/studieprogramma>

<sup>3</sup> The Dublin Descriptors also include a competence level for the PhD. However, only those for the Bachelor's and Master's degrees are discussed here.



gained in the context of studying political science, can be applied in a variety of settings. Each of the four universities that offer the bachelor's and master's in political science uses these outcome statements as the foundation for their curriculum. The next section describes the features that the programs share in common, as well as those that contribute to each university's unique profile.

	<b>Bachelor</b>	<b>Master</b>
Knowledge and understanding of the discipline	Sufficient knowledge of recent developments in the discipline to arrive at scientifically supported judgments.	The ability to integrate knowledge and address complex issues
		Understanding the specific place of political science amid other sciences.
Application of knowledge and understanding	Ability to process disciplinary knowledge; application of knowledge to phenomena that were addressed in the bachelor's curriculum.	Ability to process information from disciplines relevant to political science and apply this to political science problems; application of knowledge to phenomena that were not explicitly addressed in the master's curriculum.
	Ability to recognize and analyze social problems from the perspective of political science.	Ability to recognize and analyze complex societal problems and to evaluate solutions to these problems from the perspective of political science.
	Competence in devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within the field of study.	Ability to offer an original contribution to address societal problems.
Ability to form judgments and to reflect on the discipline and social phenomena	Ability to evaluate the merits of the design and results of empirical research.	Ability to evaluate the merits of the design and results of empirical research, including its methodological and technical aspects.
	Sufficient knowledge of normative theories to recognize the value-laden nature of both scientific theories and planned policies.	Comprehensive knowledge of normative theories in order to substantiate a position in debates regarding the value-laden nature of both scientific theories and planned policies.
Communication skills	Ability to communicate information, ideas, and solutions.	Ability to communicate scientific knowledge unambiguously, including the research design, as well as the motives and considerations underlying it. Participation in scientific and public debate.
Research skills	Have knowledge of the entire empirical research process through guided participation in all stages of scientific inquiry.	Ability to independently formulate and execute scientific research and report its results.

**Table 1.** Outcome Statements for Bachelor's and Master's Level Education (Dutch national agreements based on Europe-wide agreements and the Dublin Descriptors) – translated by author

## The Contours of Dutch Political Science Education

The four universities that offer bachelor's and master's degrees in political science are the Radboud University Nijmegen, the University of Amsterdam, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU Amsterdam), and Leiden University. Several other universities offer closely related programs, most of which are interdisciplinary. These programs are not included here.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> These closely related, interdisciplinary programs are the University of Groningen's English-language bachelor program in international affairs and international organization; Maastricht University's bachelor in European Studies (also in English); Utrecht University's interdisciplinary bachelor and master's degrees in public administration and organizational science; the University of Twente's interdisciplinary degree that combines public administration and European studies; Erasmus University Rotterdam's master's degree in sociology with an emphasis on politics and society. Additionally, the Institute for Social Studies in the Hague is affiliated with Erasmus University and offers several interdisciplinary master's degrees, including the international Mundus Master of Arts in Public Policy (MAPP).

The four universities each subdivide the two semesters of the academic year into blocks, although they do not all do so in the same way. Most courses are taught in these shorter blocks, but there are occasionally courses that stretch across more than one block. Radboud University Nijmegen breaks the semester into two blocks, each of which includes eight weeks of classes and two weeks for completing written assignments, studying for and taking exams. Hence, a semester consists of two shorter terms and lasts a total of twenty weeks. Leiden University uses a similar calendar, breaking the semester into two shorter blocks of eight weeks. In contrast, the University of Amsterdam divides the semester into three blocks. Two of them consist of seven weeks of classes followed by one exam week, for a total of eight weeks, and the third block consists of three weeks of classes and one exam week, for a total of four weeks. The VU Amsterdam's academic calendar, like that of the University of Amsterdam, breaks the semester into two sessions of eight weeks and one of four.

The implication of breaking up the semester into several blocks is that students generally focus on a more limited set of subjects at one time compared to students in the US or in Flanders – who generally take five courses simultaneously that all last the full fifteen-week semester. Depending on the number of blocks into which a semester is split, students at the Dutch universities take two or three courses simultaneously. During the four-week blocks, they often take a single course. In the following sections, we first discuss the Dutch bachelor's and then the master's programs in further detail.

### **Structure and Sequence in the Bachelor's Degree Program**

Each of the four programs offers a structured and sequenced curriculum that starts with introductory-level courses and builds across the three years to more difficult and specialized material. Students are expected to follow the prescribed sequence, which is designed to achieve the cumulative learning outcomes. Within that common model, though, each of the four political science programs has created its own, unique curriculum. This is most straightforwardly illustrated with reference to the relative proportion of the total 180 EC that is taken up by substantive knowledge of the discipline, training in methodology and professional skills, and the emphasis on supporting coursework and electives. We discuss each aspect in turn.

In addition, the four bachelor degree programs differ in their focus on instruction in the national language (Dutch) versus enhancing students' facility with English (which is the language of instruction in the master's programs), as well as their connection with the professional field and their perspective on innovation. These elements are woven into the discussion as well.

#### *Knowledge of Political Science*

Each of the four political science programs offers a broad education that includes instruction in the subfields specified in the European agreements. However, Dutch politics is most often taught from a comparative perspective, and European politics is addressed in either comparative politics or international relations. Although these subjects may be placed differently, each of the four programs do include required coursework on the politics of both the Netherlands and the European Union, along with the other subfields specified in the European agreements discussed above.

The most structured program is the one offered at Radboud University Nijmegen. It starts with an introductory course (6 EC) that provides a broad overview of the field – including Dutch and comparative politics, political theory, and international relations. Students receive broad training in the different subfields of political science in their subsequent coursework. They take six additional courses of 6 EC each in Dutch and comparative politics, six courses of 6 EC each in international relations, and three courses of 6 EC each in political theory. As shown in Table 2, which presents the total EC devoted to each subject, this leaves no room for specialization through electives on disciplinary topics, but Radboud University Nijmegen provides students with a broad and well-rounded understanding of political science.

In contrast, the University of Amsterdam offers a program that leaves room for specialization. Students also start with an introductory course (6 EC) and then proceed to take three additional required courses of 6 EC each in comparative politics, two in international relations, and one in political theory. In their second and third years, they specialize in one of four areas: public policy and governance, comparative politics, international relations, or political theory. Students start with a 12 EC core module in their area of specialization and select 24 EC in specialization electives. As



shown by the distribution of EC in Table 2, the University of Amsterdam provides a broad overview of the subfields and subsequently invites students to specialize in one.

Program component	Radboud University Nijmegen	University of Amsterdam	VU Amsterdam		Leiden University	
			POL	IR	POL	IRO
<u>Political Science</u>			POL	IR	POL	IRO
Introduction	6	6	6	6	5	5
Dutch & comparative politics	36	18	30	30	35	25
International relations	36	12	12	24	10	35
Political theory	18	6	12	12	15	5
Specialization electives	-	36	12	12	30	20
<u>Research methods</u>	24	30	24	24	20	20
<u>Academic &amp; professional skills</u>	6	18	18	18	20	20
<u>Required support (related fields)</u>	18	12	18	6	15	10
<u>Free electives</u>	24	30	30	30	15	25
<u>Thesis</u>	12	12	18	18	15	15
<i>Total EC</i>	<i>180</i>	<i>180</i>	<i>180</i>	<i>180</i>	<i>180</i>	<i>180</i>

**Table 2.** Political Science Bachelor's Program Structure at Dutch Universities in Terms of EC Allocated to Program Components. POL = Political science; IR = International Relations; IRO = International Relations and Organisations.

The remaining two universities offer two different versions of a third model: they offer two broad specializations, within each of which there are required courses and some room for electives. The VU Amsterdam asks students to choose between politics and governance or international relations. Leiden offers similar tracks, one of which is called political science and the other international relations and organizations. At both universities, the two specializations share a number of courses in common.

Like Radboud University Nijmegen and the University of Amsterdam, the VU Amsterdam also starts with a general introductory course (6 EC). The two specializations, politics and governance and international relations, share the same first- and third-year curriculum, but differ during the second year. Across the three years, students in both specializations enroll in two courses of 6 EC each in political theory. Students specializing in politics and governance take five courses of 6 EC each in comparative politics (including Dutch politics and policy) and two courses (6 EC each) in international relations. Students specializing in international relations take five courses of 6 EC each in comparative politics and four courses of 6 EC each in international relations. Both specializations complement the required coursework with two electives in their chosen political science subfield. The specialization in politics and governance includes two fewer courses in political science, because these students take two required courses in related fields, as detailed below.

Like the other universities, Leiden University also offers an introductory course (5 EC), but it is scheduled in the last block of the first year rather than at the start. And like the VU Amsterdam, Leiden University offers two specializations, political science and international relations and organizations. These specializations also share a number of courses, but differ in their emphasis. Students specializing in political science take seven courses of 5 EC each in Dutch and comparative politics, two courses of 5 EC each in international relations, two courses in political theory (one of which is 10 EC and the other 5), and 30 EC in political science electives to allow for specialization. Students specializing in international relations and organizations take five courses of 5 EC each in comparative politics, seven courses of 5 EC each in international relations, one course of 5 EC in

political theory, and 20 EC in electives to allow for specialization. The two specializations at Leiden University, like those at the VU Amsterdam, differ in their required courses in related fields. Students specializing in international relations and organizations enroll in a course in international law rather than the basic law course students in the political science specialization take.

With regard to substantive content, the four programs have made different choices on two fronts. First, there is a difference in the relative emphasis they place on the various subfields of political science. The description of the programs in terms of the number of EC awarded to each tells only part of the story. A detailed review of the scope of course offerings in each field at each university would demonstrate that the different emphases are the result not only of pedagogical choices but also of the specialties of each university's faculty. Unfortunately, it would be too unwieldy to attempt such a detailed description of course offerings within the scope of this report. However, it is important to note that each university clearly takes advantage of the expertise of its faculty to create a unique vision of the discipline.

Second, there is a difference in the degree of structure. Although all offer a curriculum that is both structured and sequenced to achieve cumulative learning, they are built on different philosophies regarding the tradeoffs between a broad and well-rounded understanding of the discipline as a whole versus a broad introduction accompanied by various degrees of specialization. There is not a single "correct" model: each program's choices will suit certain students and be less attractive to others. With regard to structure and sequencing, all four Dutch political science programs share an admirable focus on cumulative learning. This is also evident in other aspects of their bachelor's programs, which will be addressed in the next sections.

#### *Training in Research Methods*

The European agreements specify that students should receive training in both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. All four Dutch political science programs offer well-developed course sequences that prepare students to design and execute research projects. Moreover, all four programs introduce students to the craft of research during their first year.

Radboud University Nijmegen starts with a sequence of two courses (6 EC each) during the first year. The first course teaches basic research design and the second introduces students to the basics of statistical analysis. In the second year, students first take one 6 EC course on qualitative political science research methods and subsequently enroll in one 6 EC course for additional instruction in quantitative analysis, including various types of regression analysis.

The University of Amsterdam organizes research methods courses somewhat differently, introducing students to methods through a research project course (6 EC) in the last block of the first semester of their first year. This project is the vehicle for teaching research design and related skills. Starting in the second semester of their first year, students enroll in a sequence of two 9 EC research methods courses and end with one of 6 EC in the second semester of their second year. The course descriptions suggest these courses have a strong focus on various types of statistical analysis.

The VU Amsterdam also introduces students to research methods during their first two years. Students begin with a scope and methods course of 6 EC during the first semester of their first year and are introduced to statistical methods in a 6 EC course during the second semester. In the second year, they take two courses. One 6 EC course introduces students to qualitative methods, and the other offers them practical experience in designing and executing a research project.

Like the other universities, Leiden University introduces students to research methods during their first semester. During the second and third blocks of their first year, students enroll in two courses of 5 EC each in statistical analysis. They start their second year with an intensive, 10 EC course in political science methodology that also includes research design. As presented in Table 2, it looks like Leiden University's curriculum devotes fewer EC to research methods training. However, this is in part a function of how courses have been classified for this report. Leiden University offers one 5 EC course in rational choice theory, which some political scientists would classify under research methods but which are here classified under political theory. The reason is that rational choice theory, as the name suggests, is a tool for theorizing in a systematic and logical manner. This classification affects the impression of the program's relative emphasis on research methods.



The four universities all take training in research methodology seriously and provide students with a thorough grounding in the logic behind research design as well as various methodologies. Radboud University Nijmegen and the VU Amsterdam most explicitly incorporate training in qualitative methods. This training is not absent at the University of Amsterdam and Leiden University, but it is not the explicit focus of one specific course. The universities have also made different choices regarding the placement in the curriculum of various elements of the research process. For example, Radboud University Nijmegen incorporates some elements of the written reporting on research into their scope and methods courses, while the other universities incorporate this into their academic and professional skills courses – alongside training in various other types of written communication. This reflects judgments regarding how best to introduce various aspects of the research and writing process to students. As with other choices regarding program structure, there is not a single “best” way to organize these aspects of the curriculum, and all universities do clearly include these elements. It does mean that some caution in interpreting the information in Table 2 is warranted: the information on the EC devoted to research methods and professional skills is not fully comparable across universities.

What is clear, however, is that the Dutch political science programs provide far more extensive training in research methods than is common in bachelor's programs in the US. In the latter, students are generally required to take a single course in research methods. This course usually provides a basic introduction to research design and quantitative analysis. It is generally intended for the sophomore (i.e. second) year, but students often wait to take this course until later in their college education. This is possible because most political science programs are not sequenced (even if they are structured in other ways).

Additionally, the training in research methods is closely linked to the discipline of political science in the Netherlands. In comparison, at the Flemish universities most students acquire their familiarity with social science methods in generalist statistical and/or sociological research methods courses. Sometimes specific training in research design only figures at the master's level. In other words, most Flemish students obtain their training in research methods outside of their core discipline and at a later point in their education.

The training in research methods in the UK differs from the Dutch, Flemish, and American versions. In much of the UK, research methods are introduced but not practiced at the bachelor's level. Instead, it is mainly at the master's level that students actively use the research methods in their own projects. This approach is based on the general belief that at the bachelor's level, general writing and analytical skills suffice for employability. The funding structure also emphasizes this needs-based model with programs divided between field-related research skills in the general master's and a separate research-focused master's degree program that prepares students to enter a PhD program.

#### *Acquisition of Professional Skills*

The Dutch political science outcome statements include transferable skills as well as knowledge of the discipline and its research methods. These transferable skills include the ability to devise and sustain arguments, to form judgments, to draw conclusions from evidence, and to communicate judgments and conclusions both verbally and in writing.

All four Dutch political science programs include an explicit focus on these skills in a specific course, although these skills are often also practiced in other courses. At Radboud University Nijmegen, there is one course of 6 EC that includes a focus on skills such as formulating questions, scientific reasoning, verbal presentation, writing, citing and referencing, an introduction to academic journals, etc.

The University of Amsterdam devotes more space to the development of these skills. Students enroll in two courses of 6 EC each and one of 3 EC in the first year and a half of their bachelor's program. These courses focus on the development of research questions, designing empirical research, argumentation and critique of the literature, writing and formatting academic papers, giving verbal presentations, and working in a group. In other words, at the University of Amsterdam, the skills courses include some elements that other programs include in their scope and methods course.

The VU Amsterdam also offers three courses of 6 EC each, and all are taught during the first year. These courses focus on various academic skills, such as literature searches, literature review, argumentation (both written and verbal), various types of writing (position paper vs research paper), debate, and problem-solving. They do not include elements from scope and methods, but do include more basic academic skills that universities (in the Netherlands and elsewhere) often assume students have acquired before starting their studies, but in fact often have not yet mastered.

Leiden University takes a different approach and offers a sequence of eight courses that each carry a smaller workload of 2 or 3 EC. The focus is similar to the single course offered at the Radboud University Nijmegen, concentrating on skills such as writing papers in different formats – e.g., literature review, book review, opinion paper – but also on verbal communication and debate.

The value of focusing on these skills through coursework specifically devoted to them is that students are more likely to become aware that they are developing these transferable – and marketable – skills. Each of the four Dutch political science programs has taken their own, unique approach to the development of these skills and has drawn different lines separating the transferable skills from the research skills. As already indicated in the previous section, this means that the EC devoted to research methods and professional skills, as presented in Table 2, are not fully comparable.

In addition to the explicit focus on professional skills in courses, the University of Amsterdam and Radboud University Nijmegen invite the active involvement of alumni to help current students understand how their skills can translate into employment. There are some differences in how each university engages the assistance of their alumni, but both systematically bring alumni to campus to speak to – and interact with – current students. All four universities seek to gain insights from alumni not only to improve their programs' appeal to students, but also to ensure that the program's content is relevant to the labor market.

US universities often claim that their political science programs train students in these transferable skills, but students are rarely asked to enroll in a required course that is explicitly devoted to such skills. Students gain these skills as a result of assignments in their substantive courses, but they are often unaware that they have developed – and can claim – these skills. In addition, the acquisition of such skills may be somewhat haphazard as there generally is not a coherent plan that ensures that students systematically practice each of these various skills. In other words, the Dutch political science programs are providing an important service to their students not only by training them in these various skills, but also by helping them understand explicitly that they are acquiring valuable competencies for future careers.

The four political science programs in Flanders take something of a middle position between the general Dutch and the general US approach to incorporating professional skills in specific courses devoted explicitly to them, and integrating them in substantive courses. Recent curriculum reforms have mostly gone in the direction of creating separate coursework explicitly geared toward professional skills, such as academic writing or presentation skills, research design courses, and so-called skills labs. Most of these curriculum reforms have thus been driven by the desire to increase the importance attached to professional skills and to increase employability.

In the UK, recognizable, transferable skills for employability have been high on the agenda for a decade now, but not all universities have implemented skills training in the same way. The "new" (post-1992) universities have embraced the skills agenda more emphatically than the Oxbridge or red brick universities. In addition, the recent restructuring of financing for higher education has led to entrepreneurship as the new priority of the teaching excellence indicators. This focus is still in its infancy at the moment, and the evidence ranges rather widely. Essentially, any student with a new idea can be described as enterprising, whereas universities as competing entities are increasingly creating links with (and between) local and regional enterprising partners. For instance, British universities work to develop overseas student market shares by offering new "year 0" – or so-called bridging – courses with a strong profit motive. Finally, skills are nowadays often developed and honed in university-accredited work experience. This offers students a chance to build a CV, apply their theoretical knowledge, and potentially network themselves into paid work relevant to their studies. In summary, the British approach to the acquisition of professional skills varies across universities and often relies on practical work experience rather than courses within the university.



### Supporting Coursework and Electives

All four Dutch political science programs offer some room for free electives in the first semester of the third year. All four universities indicate that students may use these credit hours for free electives, a minor, an internship, or to study abroad. The University of Amsterdam and the VU Amsterdam schedule the full semester (30 EC), whereas Radboud University Nijmegen offers 24 EC of free electives and asks students to complete one scheduled course – but allows for some flexibility to facilitate internships and study abroad. At Leiden University, students who take the political science track have 15 EC of free electives, and those completing the international relations track have 25 EC.

The four universities also differ in their requirements for supporting coursework in related disciplines. All four programs require a course in law, although at the VU Amsterdam this applies only to students specializing in politics and governance and at Leiden University, only to those completing the political science specialization. The VU Amsterdam (for students specializing in politics and governance), Leiden University, and Radboud University Nijmegen also require economics. Radboud University Nijmegen and Leiden University add a third course: the former requires philosophy and the latter, European history. The University of Amsterdam requires world history as a second course in a related field, and the VU Amsterdam requires a course in the history of science. Students generally take these courses in their first and/or second year. Table 3 compares the required support in related fields.

Focus of required support	Radboud University Nijmegen	University of Amsterdam	VU Amsterdam		Leiden University	
			pol	IR	pol	IRO
Law	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Economics	✓		✓		✓	✓
Philosophy	✓					
History						
European					✓	✓
World		✓				
History of science			✓	✓		

**Table 3.** Required Support in Related Fields

These two areas, free electives and required support, also show that the four universities make somewhat different choices. First, there is not an optimal number of free electives, irrespective of whether the student seeks to complete a minor, study abroad, or get experience through an internship. Second, the four universities all agree that some study of related fields is useful for political scientists, but they differ on which ones and how many. Interestingly, there is broad agreement on the value of some exposure to the study of law.

This is the area in which the Dutch political science curriculum differs most radically from bachelor's degree programs in the US. The latter usually include far more room for electives and also have broader requirements for exposure to related fields as well as coursework in the arts, humanities, other social sciences, and sciences. There are important differences between US universities regarding these "core requirements," both in terms of the specific composition of these requirements and how many credits students must accumulate to satisfy these requirements. It is not unusual for a student to accumulate between a quarter and half of the 120 credit hours needed for the bachelor's degree by fulfilling various core requirements. The goal of such a broad range of requirements is to provide the student with a well-rounded education for engaged citizenship. The curriculum at the Dutch universities, as is common across Europe, tends to maintain a stronger focus on developing expertise in one discipline. This becomes clear, for instance, when comparing Dutch

political science curricula to Flemish ones, in which electives do figure but are more confined to a limited set of options within political science or some of the neighboring social science disciplines such as sociology, economics, law, administrative or communication sciences. Higher education in the UK, similarly, values the engagement of students with a study path of their choice. Yet, the range of choice is usually limited to modules within the political science discipline. Involvement with other disciplines is mostly quite tightly structured and confined to specific joint degrees. This often has more to do with organizational matters like timetabling and staffing than with pedagogical considerations.

In summary, this limited international comparison shows that the Dutch programs maintain the tightest focus on the student's chosen discipline, while the US bachelor's degree programs offer the most limited focus on the major – in terms of the proportion of credit hours allotted to the major. The British programs are closer to the Dutch focus on the major, while the Flemish programs offer broader opportunities for exposure to related social science disciplines. However, the latter maintain a stronger focus on the major discipline than the US programs. This cross-national variation in emphasis on the major versus broader exposure to a variety of disciplines suggests that different philosophies regarding the value of depth versus breadth underpin the curricula across different national systems of higher education.

### *The Bachelor's Thesis*

During the final semester of the bachelor's degree program, students in political science at all four Dutch universities complete a thesis. In each case, the thesis is an individual research project that is completed in the context of a small, thematic group. Each group is supervised by a faculty member, who offers a particular theme related to her or his own research and expertise. Although there are some differences in the size and function of these thematic groups, they tend to meet frequently in the early stages of the project and somewhat less frequently when students are engaged in data collection, analysis, and writing. Each thesis is graded by the supervising faculty member and an independent second reader. The two evaluators must jointly agree on the final grade for the thesis.

The amount of EC awarded for the bachelor's thesis differs between the four programs. Radboud University Nijmegen and the University of Amsterdam each award 12 EC to the thesis, while the VU Amsterdam awards 18 EC and Leiden University 15 EC, as is shown in Table 2.

The bachelor's thesis is the capstone project and demonstrates the competence level the student has achieved upon completion of the bachelor's degree. The quality of the theses logically varies within each university, as some students achieve more than others. However, on average, students are able to produce a thesis that demonstrates that they understand the (empirical) research process and can competently execute a study.

It is impressive that all students who receive a bachelor's degree in political science in the Netherlands complete a thesis. Although bachelor's degree programs in the US increasingly incorporate a capstone project or similar experience, this is not the universal practice, and only some universities require a bachelor's thesis of every graduating student. More often, only honors students have the option of completing a thesis.

The requirements in Flanders are comparable to the US. The completion of a bachelor's thesis does not figure as centrally in the curricula of the four Flemish political science programs as it does in the Netherlands. Although the University of Antwerp does require a bachelor's thesis, this consists of a group rather than an individual paper. The other three universities have adopted different strategies for teaching writing skills that are distributed across the program and do not culminate in a thesis.

The British bachelor's (and also master's) degrees most often end with a compulsory dissertation that is based either on individual research or developed on the basis of work experience gained during an internship. As is the case in the Netherlands, the requirements for the master's thesis in the UK build on those for the bachelor's thesis, both in terms of the expected length as well as the demonstrated skill in conducting research.

### *Language and Internationalization*

One of the objectives of the Bologna Process was to facilitate the mobility of highly skilled labor (EHEA 2017). For the Dutch political science programs, this has meant an increased focus on teaching



in English, both to prepare Dutch-speaking students for the international labor market and to attract international students to the Dutch universities.

The bachelor's curriculum is officially taught in Dutch. However, it also needs to prepare students for the master's programs, which are all taught in English. The four universities facilitate this transition in different ways. Radboud University Nijmegen transitions students gradually. The first year is taught entirely in Dutch, but in the second and third year an increasing number of courses is taught in English. As required by law, students in these courses may write papers and exams in Dutch. Leiden University offers a similar option, especially for students in the international relations track (IRO), and its recently re-designed bachelor's program offers the option of completing the bachelor's degree in either Dutch or English.

The University of Amsterdam also provides students with the option to complete the bachelor's degree in either Dutch or English. It specifically encourages students to study or complete an internship abroad. International students who attend the University of Amsterdam help to provide "internationalization at home" for Dutch students. The university is keen to support students in developing international and intercultural competences.

The VU Amsterdam employs the theme "connected world" to refer to both globalization and digitalization, as well as the interconnections between the two. The university encourages students to pursue international opportunities. Although the program is officially taught entirely in Dutch, some courses feature instruction in English.

In summary, all four Dutch political science programs enable students to improve their English language skills in order to facilitate their success in an increasingly international labor market. This trend is also visible in the Flemish universities, which offer some bachelor's level courses in English. Of course, the British and American universities teach in English, which means that the use of this language is not necessarily an indicator of the internationalization of higher education there. However, international students must demonstrate proficiency in English before admission to university study in both countries. Interestingly, in the UK, EU citizens are not tested for English proficiency.

#### *Final Observations Bachelor's Program*

The four Dutch universities that offer bachelor's degree programs in political science exhibit four different translations of the jointly agreed upon outcome statements. The programs share commonalities, and all are structured and sequenced, but each program retains a unique profile based on their interpretation of the outcome statements as well as their educational philosophy.

### **Structure and Sequence in the Master's Degree Program**

Most students in the Netherlands complete the one-year (or 60 EC) master's program after obtaining their bachelor's degree. Before the introduction of the bachelor-master structure at Dutch universities, students did not receive a degree until they completed the equivalent of a master's degree. Even today, students and employers often do not regard the bachelor's as a stand-alone degree – although there are indications that this may change in the future.

Given this heritage, it is not surprising that students traditionally complete both the bachelor's and master's degree at the same university. However, the introduction of the two-degree structure has made it easier for students to move to another university after completing their bachelor's degree, and they are increasingly doing so. They often choose to pursue their master's degree at a different university because they prefer a specialization or the course options at the other university.

Students may also pursue a master's degree in a different discipline than the one in which they completed their bachelor's degree, or may switch from a more practically oriented post-secondary program to the more theoretically focused university environment. In such cases, universities may ask students to complete a bridge program to ensure that they are well-prepared for the fast pace of the one-year master's degree program. The length of such programs varies in scope and duration. For example, the VU Amsterdam offers a bridge program – or pre-master – that is taught partially online and consists of 30 EC. Radboud University Nijmegen offers several different bridge programs. Depending on their background, students may be asked to complete a 30 to 60 EC pre-master. The University of Amsterdam also offers a 60 EC – or one year – bridge program.

The master's programs in political science in the Netherlands are now taught in English, with the exception of the specialization in Dutch politics at Leiden University. These English-language master's programs are accessible to students from other countries. This facilitates the internationalization of Dutch higher education, giving Dutch students the opportunity to improve their English as well as building skills in navigating international work environments.

#### *Knowledge of Political Science*

The master's programs offer students the opportunity to build on their knowledge and skills, while also being more focused and specialized. The four Dutch universities differ in the number and kind of specializations they offer, as well as in the space allotted for electives and the emphasis on additional training in research methods.

Radboud University Nijmegen offers a total of six specialization tracks within the master's program. Three of them are in political science, while the remaining three offer interdisciplinary training. The political science specializations are: 1. Comparative politics; 2. International relations; 3. Political theory. The interdisciplinary specializations are: 1. Comparative politics, administration, and society (COMPASS), jointly with public administration; 2. International political economy (IPE), with economics; 3. Conflict, Power, and Politics (CoPoPo) with the Centre for International Conflict Analysis and Management (CICAM).

All three disciplinary master's degrees are similarly structured, as is shown in Table 4. All include four required courses of 6 EC each in the subfield of specialization and one elective. There is some variation in the structure of the interdisciplinary specializations. COMPASS includes four required courses and two electives. The first elective offers the student a choice of two options, the second provides broader choice. IPE has three required courses and three electives that give students a choice from two or three options. CoPoPo has five required courses and one elective. Students may elect to do an internship instead of the elective, although it may be challenging to find an opportunity that matches the workload to the EC that can be awarded.

Program Component	Radboud University Nijmegen				University of Amsterdam		VU Amsterdam	Leiden University	
	Political Science*	COMPASS	IPE	CoPoPo	Political Science*	Conflict Resolution & Governance	Political Science*	Political Science -1*	Political Science -2*
<u>Political Science</u>									
Required	24	24	18	30	12	21	18	35	15
Electives	6	12	18	6	18	9	6	-	20
<u>Research Methods</u>	12	6	6	6	9	9	18	5	5
<u>Thesis</u>	18	18	18	18	21	21	18	20	20
<i>Total EC</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>60</i>

**Table 4.** Political Science Master's Program Structure at Dutch Universities in Terms of EC Allocated to Program Components

\* As described in the text, each political science master's programs offers several specializations or tracks. Radboud University Nijmegen offers three tracks, the University of Amsterdam offers five, the VU Amsterdam offers three, and Leiden University offers six specializations that follow one of the two EC distribution patterns shown here.



The University of Amsterdam offers two master's degrees, as shown in Table 4. The master's in conflict resolution and governance is a separate degree program that is housed in the political science department. The master's in political science offers five specialization tracks: 1. European politics and external relations; 2. International relations; 3. Political economy; 4. Political theory; 5. Public policy and governance. There is one course (6 EC) that students in all specializations take and one required introduction to the specialization track (also 6 EC). In addition, students complete two electives in their track (9 EC each).

The master's degree Conflict Resolution and Governance is structured somewhat differently from the political science tracks. It requires two intensive seminars (12 and 9 EC, respectively) and one elective (9 EC).

Similar to the model used at Radboud University Nijmegen, the VU Amsterdam offers three tracks within its master's degree program (see Table 4): 1. Comparative European politics; 2. International relations and transnational governance; 3. Global environmental governance. All three tracks have three required courses (6 EC each). Two of them are shared in common across the three specializations, and one is specific to the specialization. Students have one elective that offers a choice of three options in each track.

Leiden University also offers specializations within a single degree program, although they do not all use the same template in terms of the number of required courses versus electives. The six specializations are: 1. International Organization; 2. Dutch politics; 3. Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Development; 4. International Politics; 5. Political Legitimacy and Justice; 6. Parties, Parliaments, and Democracy. All of them start with a common course of 5 EC that introduces students to seminal works in the field. The remainder of the substantive portion of the curriculum follows one of two models. The International Organization and Dutch politics tracks consist of an additional 30 EC of required courses, while the remaining tracks have one additional required course of 10 EC followed by 20 EC chosen from a list of courses relevant to that track, as shown in Table 4.

#### *Training in Research Methods*

All four Dutch universities seek to enhance their students' ability to conduct research as part of the master's degree program, but they do so in different ways. Radboud University Nijmegen requires students in the disciplinary specializations to take two methods courses and those in the interdisciplinary tracks to take one – and thus have room for one additional substantive course. The methods courses address both qualitative and quantitative analysis, and are geared to ensuring that students can conduct research independently.

At the University of Amsterdam, students in all specializations as well as the conflict resolution and governance program enroll in the thesis seminar (9 EC). Students prepare the research design for their thesis in this course, but also learn about various quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. At the end of this seminar, students must obtain approval of their research proposal before embarking on the thesis research.

The VU Amsterdam requires students in all three specialization tracks to take one course (6 EC) in research methods. This is followed by a workshop (12 EC) that is specialized by track and designed to further develop the student's skills in all aspects of the research process. It is intended as a stepping stone towards the thesis.

Leiden University requires one course (5 EC) that deepens students' knowledge of the research process. This course is taught during the first block and underscores the emphasis on research in the master's program.

Unlike the bachelor's programs that provide training in academic and professional skills as a separate track, the master's programs infuse the focus on skills throughout the courses. In other words, the focus on skill building is also present in the master's programs but takes a different form than in the bachelor's degree programs.

#### *The Master's Thesis*

There is some variation in the number of credits allotted to the master's thesis at the four universities. The thesis is a significant component of each program, and roughly one-third of a students' credits (between 18 and 21 EC of the 60 EC degree) are earned by successfully completing the master's thesis, as is shown in Table 4.

At all four universities, students are expected to work more independently when completing the thesis for this degree compared to the bachelor's thesis. They do work under the supervision of a faculty member, and the thesis is also evaluated by both the supervisor and an independent second reader. The thesis must demonstrate proficiency in the literature, show that the student can independently design and execute research and, ideally, make a contribution to the literature.

At Radboud University Nijmegen, students complete their thesis under the direction of a supervisor and then defend it in front of a panel that consists of the supervisor and the second reader. The final grade is determined after this defense.

The VU Amsterdam, like Radboud University Nijmegen, assigns students a faculty supervisor under whose direction they complete their thesis. Students work independently, but supervisors sometimes elect to schedule group meetings with students working on closely related topics.

At the University of Amsterdam, students work in thesis groups that fit with their chosen track. These groups meet more frequently in the initial stages, when the students are designing their project, and less often as students collect and analyze data and write their thesis. It is striking that a very high proportion of the students in the master's program Conflict Resolution and Governance conduct fieldwork to collect original data for their thesis. Some do so abroad, while others stay closer to home. The program encourages and supports this fieldwork, as it provides students with a unique and relevant learning experience.

Leiden University, like the University of Amsterdam, organizes thesis seminars in which small groups of students work on related topics with their faculty supervisor. These groups also meet more frequently in the early stages and less often as students progress in their project. In addition, Leiden University offers master's students an option to combine the thesis with an internship. Students who follow this path take one seminar less and allocate 30 EC to the thesis. However, the thesis must be closely related to the work that they perform as part of the internship, and that work must be at a professional level.

The Dutch master's programs demand a lot, especially considering that they are designed to be completed in one year. In contrast, master's programs in the US are generally intended to take two years to complete. Although students typically write a thesis, it is not uncommon for US master's programs in political science to offer the option to complete the program with a comprehensive examination.

One area of difference between American and Dutch political science curricula is that, as noted above, the Dutch bachelor's programs provide far more training in research design and methods. In the US, most of the methods training takes place during the master's programs (and also PhD programs), which explains their longer duration. In other words, in the Netherlands, master's students are expected to start their studies with more extensive preparation in research-related skills, at least as compared to their US counterparts. This makes it possible to complete the degree, including the thesis, in one year, although doing so requires focus, efficiency, and hard work.

Other European master's degrees are also one-year programs, like the Dutch ones. The Flemish political science master's programs display a variation in form and content that closely resembles the variation between the four Dutch programs reviewed here. They exhibit even more variation in the weight placed on the master thesis, which ranges from 18 EC in Leuven to 25 EC in Antwerp.

In the UK, master's degrees were traditionally designed to enhance the preparation of the better students for research degrees and post-graduate level jobs. Access to master's programs was therefore limited to those students who had received high grades on their bachelor's thesis. The implicit criterion for awarding a mark of 80% (or better) for a bachelor's thesis was whether the student was judged to be able to succeed at the master's level. In addition, the hierarchy between British universities means that many post-1992 universities aim to place their best students in master's programs elsewhere. The competitive master's programs are also attractive to European and other international students. An illustration of the link between a master and a PhD is the so-called 1+3 model, which indicates a 1-year master's and a 3-year PhD. By tying the master's to the PhD, the British model distinguishes between undergraduate and post-graduate students, instead of linking bachelor's and master's programs.

This same linkage also characterizes the American system, where students generally enter the job market upon completing the bachelor's degree. Only the better students advance to master's



programs. Although some students enter the workforce upon completing the master's degree, others advance to the PhD. Students may acquire their bachelor, master, and PhD at three different universities, although many earn either the first two or the latter two at the same institution. Increasingly, students enter a PhD program immediately after completing the bachelor's degree and earn their master's while completing work to satisfy course requirements for the PhD.

These comparisons underscore that the educational systems in European countries and the US are quite different. European university systems generally share a focus on scientific education. The US does not make the distinction between practically oriented higher professional education (hoger beroepsonderwijs or hbo in the Netherlands) and scientifically oriented university education. Instead, bachelor's degrees are generally more practical in orientation, while the master's and PhD programs have a research focus. Thus, like in the UK, only the best students advance to the latter programs in the US.

#### *Final Observations Master's Program*

At all four Dutch universities, the master's program clearly enhances the student's abilities beyond those acquired at the bachelor's level. Substantively, students build on their broad base of knowledge and understanding to deepen their expertise in an area of interest. They also enhance their skills but, most importantly, they transform from a more passive to a more active engagement with the scientific endeavor.

### **Assessment and Innovation**

The Dutch political science programs engage in self-assessment of their bachelor's and master's programs not only to satisfy the requirements of the NVAO, which is necessary to maintain their accreditation, but also seek to continuously improve their curriculum. Such efforts focus on the learning experiences of students, their achievement of learning outcomes, the delivery of educational content by instructors, and the fit of the curriculum with the demands of the labor market. Assessment has become an integral part of how the programs operate.

Each program has several faculty committees that are engaged in aspects of oversight and assessment. These committees investigate complaints, but also proactively engage in evaluation of the bachelor's and master's programs and their components.

A unique strategy to improve the learning experiences of students is employed at the University of Amsterdam. At the initiative of either the instructor or the program committee, the latter elicits feedback on a course by organizing a discussion with students during a class period. The conversation is moderated by one member of the program committee, who listens to the students' comments during the first half of the class period. During the second half, the instructor is invited to join the discussion. She or he may ask questions, and the moderator shares a summary of the comments made by the students during the first half. The committee then prepares a report of the meeting, which is shared with the instructor only – unless the latter requests that it be shared more broadly. This strategy is meant to ensure that the report is used as a tool for instructional improvement only.

In addition to this innovative strategy, the program committee also communicates with students about changes that have resulted from feedback received via traditional student course evaluations. This demonstrates to students that their concerns are taken seriously.

The proactive efforts at all four universities to ensure the achievement of learning outcomes are also notable. Each program's examination committee selects a sample of courses, theses, and internship reports annually to evaluate both course- and program-level outcomes. On the basis of its findings, the committee suggests improvements. For instance, at Radboud University Nijmegen, the committee works with the relevant instructor(s) to create a targeted plan for improvement if the course evaluations suggest this is warranted. However, the results of the review of theses are addressed to the faculty as a whole. These strategies show that the Dutch political science programs take their educational mission seriously, and employ evaluation and assessment for program improvement rather than merely to placate the accrediting agency.

Furthermore, all four universities seek to gain insights from alumni to improve their program's appeal to students and ensure its relevance to the labor market. For instance, the VU Amsterdam has instituted an advisory committee – called the "veldadviesraad" – that consists of

alumni and other professionals for the express purpose of obtaining feedback about the interconnection between the university's programs and careers. This feedback is used to ensure that the curriculum provides the skill set demanded by the labor market.

These initiatives are markedly different from the role assessment generally plays at US universities. There, program evaluations are generally limited to reports that must be furnished to the relevant accrediting body. Teaching evaluations may be used to assess an instructor's effectiveness in annual performance reviews (and may thus affect salary increases), and also may be included in the faculty member's dossier for tenure and promotion. The weight of teaching evaluations for such purposes will vary between institutions. However, the explicit use of teaching evaluations to improve instruction is rare, as is the use of more labor-intensive strategies like in-class observation of teaching or focused discussions with students enrolled in courses. A systematic focus on assessing and improving learning outcomes is rare as well, as is a deliberate engagement with alumni and others to assess the connectivity to the labor market.

The Dutch universities' focus on using assessment for quality control and innovation sets the programs apart from comparable ones in the US. The difference is further magnified by variations in the attention paid to the staff's pedagogical skills. In the US, most universities encourage faculty to periodically attend workshops on various subjects related to teaching and learning, but such training is generally not compulsory. Dutch faculty, on the other hand, are expected to complete a basic teaching qualification certificate (Basis Kwalificatie Onderwijs or BKO) at very least during their initial year(s) of employment. This suggests that there is systematic attention paid to the staff's pedagogical skills. This may explain, in part, the greater use of evaluation and assessment for purposes of course and program improvement in comparison to the US. The Dutch system resembles in this respect the pedagogical skills training that most British universities offer to their faculty. New lecturers in the UK are usually encouraged, or required, to pursue a postgraduate certificate in higher education or an equivalent, which is often considered a means to assure the basic quality of university teaching. These postgraduate teaching programs also pay extensive attention to the need for constructive alignment of assessment and the pedagogical importance of feedback.

In comparison, political science programs at Flemish universities have an assessment and teaching innovation procedure that is very similar to the approach adopted at the Dutch universities, and generally also at British universities. It is important to note that since 2015, the responsibility to check the quality and validity of internal assessments is now fully borne by each university's own central services. The external check is thus not conducted by assessment panels supported by the NVAO at the level of individual programs, but at the level of the university overall for all its educational programs in all disciplines. As a result, each Flemish university has put in place review mechanisms and annual cycles of internal quality checks. In turn, the British universities operate a system of external examiners which safeguards correct implementation of marking policies and assesses whether the standard of work is set at an appropriate level for the degree awarded. On a regular basis, quality assurance takes place in research reviews, and the teaching quality is assessed regularly in cycles of 4-5 years by independent assessors per degree, and all disciplines go through this simultaneously. Although innovation occurs as part of an annual external assessors' input, the largest responses are made to proposals for change by external bodies.

In summary, the Dutch political science programs employ assessment not only to satisfy the requirements of an external assessor, but also as a tool for innovation. The focus on innovation is guided by a desire to continuously improve students' achievement of the learning outcomes. This, in turn, is guided by a desire to ensure that graduates are able to compete successfully in an international, highly skilled labor market.

### **Dutch Political Science Education in International Perspective**

The comparative discussion of the bachelor's and master's programs presented above has focused on the similarities and differences between the four Dutch political science bachelor's and master's programs, and has also provided some international comparisons. Although the latter are limited to political science education in the US, Flanders, and the UK, these comparisons underscore that the Dutch bachelor's and master's programs are thoughtfully designed. All four are bound by the same outcome statements that are closely linked to the Dublin Descriptors.



The result is that each university's political science program has a very clear notion of the competence levels for which it is educating its students. Each of the bachelor's and master's programs is both structured and sequenced, with a clear view of the competences to which the program leads. The purposes of this structure and the intended outcomes of the programs are clearly communicated to students. Each university carefully safeguards the quality of the education it offers. At both the bachelor's and master's levels, the theses confirm that the students do indeed achieve the intended competences.

Given the shared agreement on outcomes, it is not surprising that the programs share similarities. It is more remarkable that each university has been able to maintain a unique identity within the constraints of this common framework.

As already alluded to in the previous sections, the Dutch bachelor's and master's programs compare favorably to political science education elsewhere. Bachelor's degree programs in political science in the US take longer to complete – they are nominally four-year degree programs – but include less coursework in the discipline in which the student specializes and more room for broad training across the liberal arts. The coursework in the major discipline is often less structured. Although there is significant variation between different universities, structure typically means that there is a required introductory course, a required course in US government,<sup>5</sup> a required course in research methods (usually focused on research design and quantitative methods), the requirement that a student must sample from the various subfields of the discipline, and perhaps a capstone course. Although there are exceptions (Breuning et al 2001), most programs do not provide for sequencing, which often makes accumulation of knowledge and skills across the years of study difficult to achieve. In other words, US bachelor's programs are often quite flexible and encourage broad exploration. Although there is value in that, it also makes it more difficult for American students to identify the competences they have acquired upon receiving their bachelor's degree.

The Flemish bachelor's degree programs offered at the four universities in Flanders share similarities with the American ones. While the Dutch programs allow students to acquire in-depth familiarity with political science in general and with several of its sub-disciplines early in their bachelor's program, their counterparts in Flanders receive a very broad – and thus less in-depth – education in several social science disciplines. This generalist outlook of the Flemish bachelor's degree programs in political science means that students start delving deeper into the discipline only towards the end of their bachelor's trajectory and sometimes even only during their master's program.

In contrast, the focus on the discipline is quite high in the UK. Political science programs there resemble the Dutch programs in this respect. British students are introduced to the subfields already at the undergraduate level. These subfields are first introduced in year 1, students' knowledge of them is enhanced in year 2, and they pick specialized modules in year 3. The master's degree is often available as a specialization in a subfield or a wide-ranging, introductory, discipline-wide degree program targeted at overseas students or transferring students from other fields of study.

As this comparative description emphasizes, students who complete a bachelor's degree in the Netherlands, Flanders, the UK, or the US receive very different training. Flemish and US universities tend toward broad exposure to a variety of disciplines, while the Netherlands and the UK focus more explicitly on training in the major.

In contrast to the relatively unstructured bachelor's programs in the US, the master's programs are often quite structured, although not more so than in the Netherlands. Most American master's programs are two years long and include a sequence of courses in research design and methods, courses in the core literature in one or two subfields, as well as the opportunity to specialize further by enrolling in electives. An important difference is that US students enter their master's program with much less training in research-related skills.

The UK occupies an intermediate position. Students learn about research methods, but do not apply them, in their bachelor's program. This gives them more familiarity with research methods

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<sup>5</sup> At state-supported universities, a course in US government is usually mandated by the state government for all students. Texas requires two courses that must cover both US and Texas government. For political science majors, this generally means that the state-mandated requirement also satisfies a requirement for the major.

than American students have upon entering a master’s program, but fewer practical skills in using research methods than their Dutch counterparts.

Like their American counterparts, Flemish students complete a rather broad bachelor’s program that includes extensive coursework in related social science disciplines. And like the Dutch programs, the Flemish programs do include an explicit focus on transferable skills.

The British master’s programs provide for further specialization and divide between a more general focus on politics versus programs that focus on a subfield or on research methods. A special relationship exists between politics and international relations. The latter is the most “grown-up” field within political science in the UK – and many view it as a subject in itself.

In summary, graduates of Dutch political science programs are very clear about the skill set they bring to their search for gainful employment in the international, highly skilled labor market. The difference between the political science curricula is especially noticeable at the bachelor’s level. Compared to their counterparts in Flanders, the UK, or the US, Dutch students complete bachelor’s programs that are not only structured and sequenced, but also explicitly incorporate both research skills and transferable professional skills. This may be the result of adaptation to changes in higher education prompted by the Bologna Process, but it also shows that the Dutch political science programs take their educational mission seriously and offer a high-quality curriculum.

**Dutch Political Science and Interdisciplinary Bachelor’s Programs**

The growth of interdisciplinary programs provides another point of comparison for the four Dutch political science programs. Of particular interest are bachelor’s programs with an international focus, such as International Relations and International Organization (IRIO) offered by the University of Groningen and European Studies offered by Maastricht University. These programs include courses in political science, but also law, economics, and history. While the four political science programs devote between 132-150 EC to courses in the discipline, IRIO (Groningen) and European Studies (Maastricht) divide students’ attention between courses in several disciplines.

As shown in Table 5 (below), both IRIO (Groningen) and European Studies (Maastricht) place more emphasis on political science than on the remaining disciplines that make up the interdisciplinary major. IRIO (Groningen) complements coursework in political science with courses in law and economics, and requires students to spend a significant amount of time learning a language (30 EC). The program also explicitly encourages study abroad. European Studies (Maastricht) complements courses in political science with courses in law, economics, and history, and also requires some language study (6 EC). Both programs include courses in research-related and professional skills. European Studies (Maastricht) provides room for electives in European studies (18 EC). Both programs also include free electives – which can be used for a minor, to study abroad, or an internship – and a thesis. Aside from their interdisciplinary nature, these programs feature a similar structure and sequencing to the political science programs.

<b>Program component</b>	<b>IRIO, University of Groningen</b>	<b>European Studies, Maastricht University</b>
Political science	50	36.5
Law	15	9
Economics	15	19
History		19
Research methods	15	
Research skills and methods		27.5
Academic & professional skills	5	
Language & professional skills		9
Language	30	6
European studies electives		18
Minor/ Free Electives	30	24
Thesis	20	12
<b>Total EC</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>180</b>

**Table 5.** IRIO (Groningen) and European Studies (Maastricht) Interdisciplinary Program Structure in Terms of EC Allocated to Program Components

It is interesting that the disciplines featured in these programs are the same ones featured as related disciplines in the political science programs. The latter ask students to complete some coursework in these other disciplines. Although the four political science programs differ in terms of the number and kind of such courses they require, Table 3 shows that law, economics, and history are each featured at several universities. This suggests that the discipline-focused political science programs are not at odds with the interdisciplinary programs, but instead generally recognize the same disciplines as closely related. The most striking difference is that philosophy, which Radboud University Nijmegen regards as an important related discipline, is not defined as such by either IRIO (Groningen) or European Studies (Maastricht). The same is true of the other political science programs (University of Amsterdam, VU Amsterdam, Leiden University).

Despite this overall agreement on related disciplines, the approach of the disciplinary programs differs from the interdisciplinary ones. The former create a unified curriculum by focusing on political science and its subfields, including fields that sit on the boundary between political science and a related discipline – such as comparative and international political economy. The interdisciplinary programs tend to present the disciplines more narrowly. For instance, rather than a course in political economy taught by a political scientist, such programs offer a course taught by an economist that may focus on international monetary relations or international trade theory. Students in such interdisciplinary programs must learn to make connections between related disciplines themselves. For some, this is the attraction of such programs, while others will experience interdisciplinary programs as consisting of disconnected parts. Students in programs with a strong focus on one discipline are likely to be exposed to a greater range of subjects within that discipline and, as a result, gain an appreciation for the possible interconnections between related fields.

Just as the variation between the four political science programs may make them attractive to different students, it is likely that the choice between a discipline-focused and an interdisciplinary program depends on individual interest and aptitude. The political science programs might wish to highlight the range of subjects within the discipline and, especially, the way in which some of the subfields interconnect with related fields.

### **Looking to the Future**

This limited international comparison emphasizes that the state of the art of political science education in the Netherlands is outstanding. The bachelor's and master's programs offered at the four universities explicitly aim to achieve the agreed-upon outcomes, which are discipline-specific but consistent with the Dublin Descriptors. Although there is variation in the strategies employed to achieve these outcomes, all four Dutch universities have made great strides toward achieving the objectives of the EHEA. In summary, the four Dutch universities offer thoughtfully designed bachelor's and master's programs that provide students with the knowledge and skills for success in the international labor market.

In an effort to broaden the accessibility of these high-quality programs to additional students, the University of Amsterdam and Leiden University now offer the bachelor's degree in English as well as Dutch. This makes it possible for these universities to attract more international students, who will benefit from the well-designed programs.

The master's degree programs are already taught entirely in English. They attract international students from a variety of educational backgrounds, some of whom are better prepared than others to succeed in the fast-paced, one-year master's program. The challenge for the Dutch universities is how to best integrate these students by providing appropriate bridge programs. In response to this challenge, the universities offer bridge programs that vary in duration (from 30 to 60 EC) and manner of delivery (in person or online). Depending on the students' skill sets, shorter or online bridge programs may be adequate or may be insufficient to prepare international students to succeed in the one-year master's program. On the other hand, bridge programs that require a full academic year to complete turn the one-year master's program into a two-year master's program. The latter option may enhance the student's likelihood of success in the master's program, but may reduce the likelihood that a student will enroll in the first place. This dilemma is not easily resolved.

Current bridge programs demonstrate that all four Dutch universities recognize that international students who seek entry into the Dutch master's programs have a different skill set than those students who have completed their bachelor's degree at one of the four Dutch universities.

The present solutions differ in duration and manner of delivery. It is unclear which solution is more effective in enhancing the ability of international master's students to complete the program successfully and on time. The four universities may wish to compare their bridge programs and the success rate of international students in their master's programs. Such a comparison might yield useful insights that can lead to better targeted bridge programs, which in turn can enhance the attractiveness of these master's programs to international students.

All four universities gather insights from alumni and others to evaluate the connection of their programs to the highly skilled labor market. These insights provide useful feedback, but this appears to be concentrated on the Dutch labor market. As the Dutch universities are increasingly positioning themselves as an attractive option for international students, it may be useful to obtain a deeper understanding of the highly skilled labor markets in the countries from which these students have come. This could benefit not only the international graduates, but also Dutch ones who seek positions internationally.

A brief comparison with two interdisciplinary programs suggests that the Dutch political science programs are in agreement with these programs regarding the relevant related fields. The disciplinary focus of the political science programs allows for a deeper engagement with the various subfields of the discipline, including those that straddle the boundary with the related disciplines. Rather than learning a little about several disciplines, the focus on one discipline might be positioned explicitly as allowing students to better integrate their knowledge, thus preparing them to use their knowledge to understand – and possibly devise responses to – complex social and political issues.

In summary, the Dutch political science programs offer high-quality curricula that not only serve Dutch students well, but should be attractive to ambitious international students also. However, as the universities enroll more international students, they must be cognizant of the need to expand their understanding of the highly skilled labor market more internationally. This will serve all graduates of these programs.

The state of the art of political science education in the Netherlands is best characterized as top-notch: the four universities offer students high-quality, carefully considered bachelor's and master's programs that compare very favorably to those offered elsewhere. Their structured and sequenced nature ensures cumulative learning and the achievement of the agreed-upon outcomes. These qualities enable the four Dutch universities to position themselves as an attractive option not only for Dutch students, but also for an increasingly international student audience.

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