

**Development dialogue MSc Geographical Information Sciences VU  
Friday October 18 2024**

*Panel members present: Arnold Bregt, Gudrun Wallentin, Dirk Barneveld, Manuka Khan & Linda te Marvelde*

*Programme members present: Jaap Boter, Michiel van Drunen, Bart Kusse, Maurice de Kleijn, Tom Bos & Karlijn Snel (secretary)*

It was decided before the development dialogue to cover two topics, long-term positioning of the programme and enhancing alumni engagement. Programme director Jaap Boter introduced the first topic as follows:

*Long-Term Positioning of the Programme*

*As an English-taught, postgraduate, and fully online MSc in GIS, our programme occupies a niche in the Netherlands and beyond. With the recent collaboration with the VU Institute for Environmental Studies (IVM) and partnerships with institutions like ITC UTwente and Geo-ICT, we have solidified our academic and labour market foundation. Looking ahead, we seek the panel's guidance on strategic positioning:*

- \* Should we prioritize the Dutch market, or aim for a stronger European or global presence, considering the aging GIS workforce?*
- \* What thematic areas (e.g., Geo AI, environmental analytics) or innovative teaching methods could differentiate us further in the international arena?*
- \* Are there emerging roles or trends in the GIS-field (beyond Geo AI) that we should align with to future-proof our programme?*

The panel highlights the significance of recognizing the programme's unique qualities, which should be leveraged for its development. While the programme lacks the same level of integration within the faculty as others, making it somewhat vulnerable, this independence also presents opportunities. The management team possesses a strong sense of ownership over the programme, which can be a strategic advantage.

Being part of SBE lends the programme a distinctive character, enhancing its already unique offerings. It is also mentioned that the Dutch market needs to be prioritized in the programme, since the international aspect is already present in its participants and courses.

Thematic areas such as AI and digital twinning are important, but the key question remains: how can these tools influence decision-makers? What insights can they provide, and how can we effectively integrate this information into the decision-making process? While the tools may evolve, these fundamental questions will endure. Trends come and go. The tools differ, but the goals stay the same.

Also think about the Dutch aspects that could be emphasized more, although it being an international programme. GIS concepts are universal, but the specific applications and expertise that can be brought to the table vary. The Netherlands is known for its strengths in areas like critical thinking and innovative practices. Identifying unique applications or approaches where the university or the country excels may provide an advantage globally. Connecting with societal challenges that are also relevant in other contexts can further enrich the curriculum. For instance, the Netherlands has a strong reputation in spatial planning, presenting opportunities for collaboration with other institutes, such as those focused on water management. This approach would benefit both international and Dutch students, creating a more dynamic and impactful learning experience.

A panel member shares their experiences with an international programme, which, like SBE's GIS program, operates as commercial education within a governmental institution. This dual nature creates potential tensions, but it also offers distinct advantages. The programme has enjoyed success with students who are geographically near, even though it is an English-taught online programme. The second target group consists of international participants from outside Europe, adding a valuable global dimension. The third market focus is on Europe, which presents opportunities for collaboration between the two programmes. In their experience, the most effective promotion for a programme remains word of mouth.

Another idea is to collaborate with an international programme, which could create possibilities. The global perspective gained from peers is very valuable for students, enriching their educational experience. Partnering with an international programme could also help mitigate risks and hazards related to pricing.

Programme director Jaap Boter introduced **the second topic** as follows:

## 2. Enhancing Alumni Engagement

*Given the programme's long history and recent surge in student numbers, we are in an excellent position to strengthen alumni relations. Initiatives like inviting alumni to hybrid thesis presentations and organizing online seminars have been well-received, but we see potential to do more. We welcome the panel's input on the following:*

- \* *What specific activities or programmes (e.g., participation in newer courses like Geo AI, mentoring, or field-related projects) would offer the most value to our alumni and current students?*
- \* *Considering our resource constraints, how can we optimize engagement activities to achieve a high impact while respecting the limited allocation of teaching hours?*
- \* *What would constitute meaningful non-monetary returns on investment in alumni engagement?*

The panel mentions alumni being essential for building and sustaining lasting communities. Former students often lead to new enrolments by connecting with employers who will send new students to the programme. To keep these communities vibrant, several strategies can be employed, with personal meetings being a key element. Organizing an annual conference, for instance, provides an opportunity for lecturers, current students, and alumni to gather, interact face-to-face, and forge enduring relationships. These connections not only strengthen the community but also yield valuable benefits for all involved. The programme is not only growing, but has also existed for over thirty years, creating a substantial alumni body for networking and possible fruitful interactions. A (physical) newsletter is also a great way to keep your alumni community involved and close by, and in the letter social events can be announced.

It is also mentioned that a body of knowledge which can be easily accessed would also be beneficial for students. This resource could help alumni to keep themselves informed, maintain connections, and share valuable content. Additionally, it could also be an opportunity to collaborate with other alumni networks, for instance at each others events. This would be a nice way of creating cross overs between different fields of expertise, enriching the overall community.

The panel has some positive experiences with creating LinkedIn groups, specifically for alumni as well as for alumni and students. The latter makes it easier for students to reach out to alumni with their questions when needed. The students also create some liveliness in the LinkedIn group, given they want to benefit from the group while still studying and will actively reach out. The LinkedIn page also helps with tracking alumni and their position.

The professional field is crucial for a programme like GIS. Regular contact with the workfield advisory board should occur multiple times a year, and the panel was surprised to learn that the board isn't consulted more frequently. Maintaining connections with alumni is also essential, as they contribute to a positive atmosphere around the program. However, it's important not to limit content development to alumni or the advisory board alone. To keep the program relevant and effectively develop the content of the courses, seek input from the best experts in the field, regardless of whether they are alumni or affiliated with the same university. While alumni are invaluable, it's critical to also engage with outside voices to maintain a fresh perspective.