

# Report Development Dialogue M Media Studies: Digital Cultures, Maastricht University

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Secretary: Yannick Slagter

*During the site visit of the MA programme Media Studies: Digital Cultures at Maastricht University, the visit was concluded with a development dialogue. This session allowed the programme to engage with the panel on several forward-looking topics.*

*Firstly, the discussion centred on GenAI and the future of the master's thesis. The programme is considering rethinking the thesis structure – potentially shortening its length, redistributing ECs, or offering alternative thesis trajectories – and sought the panel's perspective.*

*Secondly, the programme invited input on course and skills development. If thesis ECs are reduced, which new skills, topics, or themes would be valuable additions to the curriculum, especially in light of current digital and societal shifts?*

*Lastly, the programme raised the issue of the pre-master structure. Currently long and intensive, the pre-master sees dropout or non-enrolment rates. The faculty is considering shortening or restructuring it and asked the panel for advice on how to optimise its role in student progression.*

*What follows is a brief overview of the points discussed during this developmental session:*

## **1. GenAI and the future of the Master's thesis**

The panel encouraged the programme to explore more flexible and creative alternatives to the traditional Master's thesis. Suggestions included a multifaceted structure, potentially combining qualitative research, design thinking, and creative production (e.g. a podcast series or a portfolio). A more radical approach might involve allowing students to compile a portfolio of outputs, such as a research article, public-facing content, or media artefacts. The example of Utrecht University's History department, which offers article-based thesis formats, was mentioned. The panel stressed the importance of identifying the core educational value of the current thesis and ensuring that any alternative preserves these elements. Emphasis was placed on piloting: try different formats on a small scale to see what works. The changing academic and professional landscape, especially with GenAI, justifies experimenting.

## **2. Course and skills development opportunities**

The panel supported the idea of developing new learning components, particularly those that build on existing courses rather than replacing them. They suggested creating an additional layer that deepens prior learning – drawing on the programme's rich conceptual and methodological base – also to better prepare students for the job market. Themes like phenomenology and post-phenomenology could be revisited through current societal and technological challenges.

A notable idea was introducing intensive theme weeks, inspired by a panel member's experience in Denmark: inviting top experts for focused, week-long sessions on topics like big data or crowdsourcing, including hands-on mini-projects. The programme noted this could align well with a rethinking of Problem-Based Learning, enabling students to engage deeply with real-world issues. The panel also highlighted the value of acquiring project management skills, linking the activities to the programme's intended learning outcomes. They encouraged combining methods and theory in any future skills-oriented initiatives.

### **3. Pre-Master setup: restructuring across the faculty**

The panel noted that feedback from students that did the pre-master was actually very positive, though this may partly reflect survivor bias. They highlighted that the UvA model works well, also fostering group cohesion. However, while reducing the pre-master from 60 EC is worth considering, the structure must avoid delaying students' actual entry into the master's programme by a full year.