RESEARCH ASSESSMENT REPORT

RAPID SOCIAL AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION: ONLINE & OFFLINE

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE STUDIES

TILBURG UNIVERSITY

2015-2021

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Preface

On behalf of the review committee, I would like to thank everyone connected with the RSCT program for the hospitality afforded to us during our visit and the opportunity to hold in-depth meetings with various members of the academic community. On the basis of what we had read in advance in the self-assessment, we shared a highly positive attitude towards the program and its innovative approaches to research, its commitment to horizontal management structures and its emphasis on societal relevance. Naturally, this enthusiasm was accompanied by some questions and concerns which we were keen to follow up on during our visit. The arrangements for the visit enabled us to hold frank and detailed discussions with managers, academics and PhD candidates and we were pleased to find that our questions were answered, the majority of our concerns allayed, and our positive attitude vindicated.

We have made a small number of recommendations in the current document which we hope will contribute to solving those issues that remain and to strengthening the program going forward.

Prof. dr. Tom Bartlett, chair of the review committee

1. Executive summary

Rapid Social and Cultural Transformation: Online & Offline (RSCT) is the research program of the Department of Culture Studies (DCU). The program started running in 2015 as a merger of three different research groups in sociolinguistics, religious studies, and literary studies. The interdisciplinary research program aims to explore how digitalization and globalization have consequences for social, cultural, and artistic practices. The committee applauds the humanities in the digital age approach, which serves as a necessary complement to the more technocentric Big Data-driven approaches that tend to dominate this field of study. In addition, the committee welcomes the distinctive angle taken within this field in concentrating on qualitative research, with slow and deep methods of analysis.

RSCT aims for a management strategy that is horizontally laid out and therefore 'hands-off', creating an environment in which researchers can produce ethically responsible and scientifically sound work which is driven by their own interest and specialisms. According to the interviews the committee carried out, the horizonal management approach was preferred over a more hierarchical approach, although it was suggested to the committee that there was a downside to this. As effective sharing of information and decision-making is not centralized, it is highly dependent upon the level of involvement and activity of individual professors to ensure the group clustered around each of them has the same degree of access. This creates the potential that some decisions are made without equal input from all concerned. There is also a lack of a transparent structure to familiarize newer members of academic staff with key processes, such as opportunities and requirements for career development and promotion.

The committee established that RSCT's research and output are of very high quality. The research staff includes well-positioned and recognized researchers at the national and international level. RSCT researchers contribute to scholarly development and discussions within many fields and play an important role in (re)defining the field at the national level and beyond.

RSCT also has a strong track record in creating societal impact, particularly on migration and literacy and on digital literacy. It is obvious to the committee that *Diggit* serves as a very useful and effective interface between the program and the wider community, but the tremendous success of this innovative resource should not take away from other impactful initiatives (such as work in education and with asylum seekers), which were not as fully highlighted as they deserved to be in the self-assessment. The committee endorses the need of a future societal relevance strategy and encourages the management to be more specific on what RSCT means by societal relevance and what goals the program aspires to.

The committee recognized the variety of non-traditional research outputs encouraged within RSCT, though it was not always clear if internal recognition of such work translated into successful performance reviews and promotion applications.

The committee concludes that the RSCT program has become a robust community of researchers. The increased focus on online-offline sociation and rapid transformations seems well designed to promote the distinctive expertise and contributions of the research program. The consolidation around the defined areas of the RSCT research program has enabled a very

fast response to the Sector plan funds, resulting in five new assistant professor positions. Furthermore, the collaborative grant-writing approach has proven highly successful in the recent period, especially at the Dutch level (NWO-related grants capture), and is an excellent strategy for developing the grant-writing experience and skills of junior staff.

The committee noted that staff members experience a high workload and that there are well-founded fears of burnout amongst staff. This is a serious issue with a variety of causes, and although the committee does not think it appropriate to insist on specific solutions, the committee proposes some options and expects that some of these, or other effective measures, will be implemented.

In 2021, the RSCT program supervised 29 internally funded or grant-based and 63 external PhD candidates. The committee has the overall impression that the PhD training program is solid with many different aspects of education, training and supervision carefully considered. Next to teaching load, the high number of external PhDs and the high frequency of support offered to PhD candidates appear to be an important cause for the high workload amongst staff. It is not clear that the open-door policy and on-demand attention offered are actually available to all PhD candidates to the same degree.

The committee made several recommendations for further improvements in the future. The most important recommendations are:

- Create a good balance between the horizontal management approach and providing a visible structure for curriculum and research planning, and career development.
- Develop a societal relevance strategy that provides a clear vision of what RSCT means by societal relevance and what goals the program aspires to. This includes thinking beyond research publications and dissemination to include working with non-academic groups on the ground. To complement the focus on slow research, a similar focus on the small and local may enhance RSCT's distinctive contribution.
- Develop a diversified output strategy to engage with the general public that encompasses both social media and traditional (print) media and in particular, Dutch language publications
- Make explicit how the contribution of the individual researcher to societal impact is measured and rewarded, particularly in light of the benefits of the non-traditional outputs referred to above.
- Building on existing links with other departments (see p. 17), expand the interdisciplinary scope of the program through increased research and supervision collaborations outside the Department and in the School, in particular with the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences.
- Ensure that the Sector plans funding will be maintained at the local (department) level in the longer term and that this will be used for the development of the whole department rather than solely for new appointees.
- In the absence of a much-needed university-wide sabbatical policy, develop proposals for a program level approach and negotiate at the School level for additional resources to expand this.
- Develop a structural plan to enable all staff to have at least one teaching-free period per academic year.

- Decrease the amount of workload related to the supervision of large numbers of PhD candidates.
- Inform PhD candidates in a more structured way about Departmental policies and developments.
- Develop a policy to improve the composition of the research staff regarding ethnic diversity.

2. Introduction

2.1 Aim of the assessment

All publicly funded university research in the Netherlands is evaluated at regular intervals in compliance with a national Strategy Evaluation Protocol (SEP 2021-2027). This protocol describes the aims and methods used to assess publicly funded research in the Netherlands. It was drawn up and adopted by the Universities of the Netherlands (UNL), the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW). The evaluation process, which is applied at the research unit level, consists of an external peer review conducted every six years.

The committee was requested to assess the quality of research conducted by Rapid Social and Cultural Transformation: Online & Offline (RSCT) of Tilburg University on the main assessment criteria specified in the SEP: (1) Research Quality, (2) Societal Relevance and (3) Viability. Furthermore, SEP asks committees to take four specific aspects into account when assessing the three central criteria. These are: (1) Open Science, (2) PhD Policy and Training, (3) Academic Culture and (4) Human Resources Policy.

In addition to these criteria specified in the SEP, the Executive Board of Tilburg University requests the committee to pay special attention to the following additional topics as well as to offer its assessment and recommendations:

- The coherence and collaboration of the program in relation to its interdisciplinary nature and share possible recommendations for future directions in this regard.
- The role of the online journal *Diggit* in the societal impact of the program and its role for research-informed education.

2.2 The committee

The Executive Board of Tilburg University appointed the following members of the committee:

- o Prof.dr. Tom Bartlett (chair) - Professor of Functional and Applied Linguistics - Glasgow University;
- o Prof.dr. Ortwin de Graef - Professor of English Literature - KU Leuven;
- o Prof.dr. Manon S. Parry - Professor of Medical History - Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam / Senior Lecturer in American Studies and Public History - University of Amsterdam;
- o Dr. Emiliano Trere -Reader in Data Agency and Media Ecologies – Cardiff University;
- o Prof.dr. Andrea Young - Professor of English - University of Strasbourg;
- o Sanne Rotmeijer, MA (PhD representative), Media Studies, Leiden University Centre for Linguistics.

The Executive Board of Tilburg University appointed Esther Poort of De Onderzoekerij as the committee secretary. All members of the committee signed a declaration form stating no conflict of interest and ensuring impartiality and confidentiality.

2.3 Procedures followed by the committee

Prior to the site visit, the committee reviewed detailed documentation comprising the self-assessment report of the institute including appendices.

The committee proceeded according to the Strategy Evaluation Protocol (SEP) 2021-2027. The assessment was based on the documentation provided by RSCT and the interviews with their management, selections of senior and junior researchers, and PhD candidate representatives. The interviews took place on October 20, 2022 (see Appendix A).

During the site visit, the committee discussed its assessment and deliberated on the conclusions and recommendations. Based on these discussions and the written input of committee members the secretary wrote a first draft of the report. This draft report was circulated to the committee for all members to comment on. Subsequently, the draft report was presented to RSTC for factual corrections and comments. After considering this feedback in close consultation with the chair and other committee members, the secretary finalized the report. Subsequently, the text was finalized and presented to the Executive Board of Tilburg University.

3. Assessment of the research of RSCT

3.1 Organization, Management and Governance

Rapid Social and Cultural Transformation: Online & Offline (RSCT) is the research program of the Department of Culture Studies (DCU). The program started running in 2015 and was born out of a process that aimed to shape a new research unit that brought together three different existing research groups (Language and Globalization; Literature and Visual Art in the European Public Sphere; Religion and Rituality), which ran from 2009 to 2014.

The Department of Culture Studies is one of the five Departments of the Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences (TSHD). Research and education at TSHD have a unique focus on humans and humanness in the context of the globalizing digital society, on the development of artificial intelligence and interactive technologies, on their impact on communication, culture and society, and on moral and existential challenges that arise. TSHD focuses on the further development of digital sciences, with strong roots in the humanities and social sciences, and on the further development of the humanities and social sciences with digital sciences.

The self-assessment indicates that RSCT focuses on how globalization and digitalization are experienced by people and societal groups and what consequences this has for their understanding of their globalized world. As such, DCU's research program hosts scholars who teach in four different yet interconnected (culture studies) educational clusters responsible for the BA program Online Culture and 4 MA tracks. These clusters, listed below, are in line with the key perspectives taken in the research program:

1. Arts and Media Studies (including Children's Literature, Media & Culture)
2. Digital Culture Studies
3. Health Humanities
4. Cultural Diversity

Since 2018, activities stemming from Babylon - Centre for the Study of Superdiversity - have been incorporated into DCU's research program.

3.2 Mission and Strategy

As described in the self-assessment, the mission of RSCT is to explore and explain how digitalization and globalization have consequences for social, cultural, and artistic practices. In the 21st century, the online and offline worlds increasingly integrate. Modes of everyday interaction have changed worldwide, and the RSCT research program examines various aspects of the rapidly transforming public sphere. Existing analytical and theoretical frameworks to account for these transformations are continuously subject to critical reflection and revision.

Rather than taking on board the mission to which the digital humanities in the Netherlands generally subscribe, with the consequent dominance of Big Data-driven approaches, RSCT aims to develop a Humanities of the Digital Age, with a focus on the human and humanness. To understand the complexity of these phenomena, RSCT researchers go beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries, transcending both conceptual as well as methodological differences where necessary. The disciplinary diversity helps to increase the empirical territory the research program can cover. This forms an opportunity for cutting-edge research, a growing stream of external funding and a steady flow of contributions to society.

The self-assessment indicates that RSCT deploys sustainable and socially engaged qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Researchers make use of multiple and complementary sets of methods and approaches, including (digital/online) discourse analysis, (digital/online) interpretive ethnographic, visual narrative approaches to the analysis of images, hermeneutics, surveys, and corpus-based and experimental methods.

The committee applauds the humanities in the digital age approach, as opposed to Big Data-driven approaches. This is very necessary, especially as so much funding follows the big data approach and has severely limited the scope of potential research. It is also a smart choice, ensuring a strong individual profile and relevance of RSCT. The research focus of the program certainly draws on the existing strengths and reputation of its predecessors while homing in on an area of particular and ongoing relevance in the rapid social and cultural change and the inescapable role of digitalization in questions of cultural and ideological change and individual and group socialization. Of particular note is the distinctive angle taken within this field in concentrating on qualitative research, with slow and deep methods of analysis.

The committee concludes that the RSCT program has become a robust community of researchers. The increased focus on online-offline sociation and rapid transformations seems well designed to promote the distinctive expertise and contributions of the research program. The committee encourages RSCT to develop a strategy which focuses on the theoretical and methodological strengths of its researchers and the distinctiveness of its focus on slow, in-depth and interpretative research in order to further increase the reputation of the research program internationally. This demands effective communication of the benefits of such research not only in its own terms but as a necessary complement to the more technocentric approach to Big Data of other institutions. Furthermore, the committee suggests that robust promotion of the distinctive aims and achievements of the RSCT program would be an important factor in attracting students.

As described in the self-assessment, the research program aims for a management strategy that is horizontally laid out and therefore 'hands-off', in order to create an environment of relative freedom. Within the broadly defined themes of the program, researchers can produce ethically responsible and scientifically sound work, following their own research interests and specialisms. The committee at first wondered if there would be a tension between the hands-off approach described in the Self-Assessment and a need to adhere to department-wide research strategies and alliances. However, based on responses in each of the interview sessions, the committee concluded that such tensions were not a major concern and that, while overall the research projects are integrated into the broader research program,

individual researchers feel they have sufficient freedom for individual creativity and productivity. At the same time the flexible, broad, and interconnected themes create coherence across the different activities and allow for strong profiling of the program.

Although this horizontal management approach generally works well, the committee noted as a downside the absence of a transparent structure which clearly sets out information about, for example, promotion criteria and procedures. It was suggested that some decisions are actually made behind 'closed doors'. Even when the intent is to include everyone, the lack of a more centralized structure for sharing information and opportunities means that inevitably some people are sometimes out of the loop. Whether that is because they are clustered around more or less active members of the system or because time and workload pressures disrupt the ideal flow of things, this approach inevitably creates inconsistency. The committee, therefore, encourages the management to find a better balance between the horizontal management approach and providing a more transparent formal structure.

3.3 Research quality

The self-assessment states that the overall ambition of RSCT is to develop and practice research that helps to establish a solid reputation among national and international academic peers and relevant societal stakeholders. A key ambition is to publish high-quality international peer-reviewed publications and to have a good track record in the organization of and attendance at conferences and workshops. RSCT finds it of utmost importance that scholars publish in the usual outlets for scientific output. This includes single-and multi-authored monographs, edited volumes, journal articles and book chapters.

Over the reporting period, this resulted in an impressive track record: 31 books, 18 edited volumes, 9 special issues of peer reviewed international journals, 430 peer reviewed journal articles, 269 book chapters in edited volumes as well as in handbooks and encyclopedias, and 70 completed PhD theses. It is clear to the committee that RSCT researchers contribute to scholarly development and discussions within many fields and play an important role in (re)defining the field at the national level and beyond. In particular, several prominent senior researchers contribute significantly and innovatively to their field with publications in high-ranking journals. The key articles submitted to the committee were of a high quality and represented a variety of modes, languages, and approaches.

Despite this strong record in terms of both quantity and quality of research outputs, there is a notable decrease in research output between 2015-2021. The COVID -19-pandemic has undoubtedly played a role here. Moreover, the program has lost some of its most senior and internationally renowned and visible members. These scholars contributed very substantially to the research output of the group. Notwithstanding these explanatory factors, the committee was somewhat concerned about this decline in research output, especially by the dramatic drop in publications aimed at the general public (from 75 to 17) and in book/film/article reviews (from 14 to 2). However, the committee learned that the decrease was mainly due to the decision no longer to include media appearances because of the risk of focusing on one or two active members of the department in Dutch media. In addition, this

decrease in outreach has largely been compensated by the impressive success of *Diggit Magazine*. Nevertheless, the committee thinks that there may be a valuable underserved audience more tied to traditional print media, to community-based means of dissemination and/or to publications in the Dutch language.

The research staff includes very well-positioned and recognized researchers at the national and international level with strong research profiles at all ranks including assistant and associate professor. This academic reputation is demonstrated by the presence of staff in for example NWO review panels, the NWO Table for redefining humanities as a field, and the NWO Social Sciences and Humanities board. RSCT members further contribute to several national, as well as international, scientific committees and participate in the organization of conferences and workshops. The various RSCT researchers delivered 87 invited lectures including keynote lectures at major national and international scientific conferences.

The department's academic reputation is also evidenced by the success of the staff members in obtaining competitive grants, especially at the Dutch level. RSCT has secured, among other grants, two NWO Veni grants, one NWO Vici grant, and several larger national grants from NWO and Nuffic. RSCT also has a solid score in the NWO PhD Humanities program, with six successful attempts in the past seven years. At the European level, RSCT obtained one ERC starting grant, one EU Marie Currie grant and two Erasmus+ grants.

3.4 Societal relevance

The self-assessment describes convincingly how RSCT researchers have delivered impactful research. RSCT has a particularly strong track record in research on migration and literacy and on digital literacy. For example, ERASMUS+ initiatives such as the Migrant Literacy Project and the Fake News Observatory are clearly highly relevant. RSCT has used this Erasmus funding successfully to create valuable activities including the development of pedagogical resources for citizens and other kinds of stakeholders. Societal impact is also demonstrated through the publications of RSCT researchers in Dutch to reach relevant specialized audiences on topics related to Dutch culture, such as literature, children's literature, regional language and identity, the Dutch education system and local ritual and religious phenomena.

The self-assessment illustrates the use of RSCT research by societal groups by highlighting several research projects of PhD candidates with a strong societal impact component. The committee appreciates that PhD candidates contribute to furthering the Department's societal impact by delivering usable products for society, next to scientific knowledge growth. The committee also values the participation of RSCT in the university-wide initiative entitled 'Students 4 Students'. This has resulted, among other things, in three knowledge clips on superdiversity, growing up in a multilingual environment and linguistic landscaping to be adopted by many upper junior primary school pupils across the region. The committee encourages RSCT to invest in this kind of deep and long-term collaboration with governmental and non-governmental organizations in order to develop research projects with a strong societal impact.

The societal impact of the RSCT research is also evidenced by the participation of RSCT scholars in a broad range of activities to disseminate academic knowledge in the public sphere as well as appearing as guests in various societal venues and digital knowledge platforms. For example, RSCT researchers participate in literary juries and in the Living Library in de LocHal in Tilburg. Another example is that RSCT scholars initiated platforms where science meets with societally relevant partners, for example, the Funerary Academy.

As emphasized in the self-assessment, the Department's spearhead in terms of usable products *is Diggit Magazine*. *Diggit* serves as an important digital outlet through which RSCT research results are made publicly available and reach a wide and diverse national and international audience. Since its start in 2016, *Diggit* has seen an astonishing increase in readership. In the past five years (1 January 2018- 11 April 2022), 1,471,625 users visited *Diggit.* It has a global audience, with over 100 countries counting more than 100 visitors each. The impact of Diggit in the field is, for instance, evidenced by the fact that several influential researchers in the field of digital culture, digital discourse analysis, platform studies, and critical algorithm studies have given interviews to *Diggit*. This societal impact is also visible in the fact that several *Diggit* articles are used in Wikipedia lemmas related to digital culture topics.

The committee is convinced that *Diggit* serves as a very useful and effective interface between the program and a wider audience. It is an especially effective way to embed teaching in departmental output, as so much of the material is produced by students, and in return offers them valuable experience in writing for a broad audience and the opportunity to build a portfolio of published work. The growth in readership is impressive and the information generated on the most read material is also a useful stimulus for future research. It is largely a tool of dissemination, however, and as such reflects a rather narrow definition of societal relevance compared to the wider scope of activities program members are involved in. As pointed out before, the committee does think that there may still be an unserved audience RSCT could and indeed should reach out to.

Future societal relevance strategy

RSCT aims to formulate a future societal relevance strategy and secured 0.2 FTE of a member of the academic staff to champion this. The committee strongly supports this but suggests that TSHD pool resources across the different Departments that comprise it, or even in a joint investment between TSHD and the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences to appoint a research officer with the remit to facilitate relevance transfer.

The committee considers it very important that the future societal relevance strategy provides a clear vision on what RSCT means by societal relevance and what goals the program aspires to. Although the committee fully recognizes the value of *Diggit* regarding social impact, the committee believes that the significant societal impact of other projects was understated within the self-assessment, as also became clear in follow-up questions during the interviews.

The committee is of the opinion that the future strategy should not be limited to the goal to align with the national NWA funding scheme (Dutch Research Agenda). This funding schema

has quite limited support for managing collaborations. Given the current workload and the massive amount of time needed to nurture and sustain societal collaboration, it is likely that such activities could further overload researchers without proportionate returns. Designing PhD/postdoc projects around the societal partnerships (and not just research to be "shared" with them) might help make these more feasible. Therefore, developing a wider range of societal partnerships and a broader array of big and small projects would help more of the researchers find new audiences and partners for their work.

The future societal relevance strategy should also make explicit how the contribution of the individual researcher to societal impact is measured and rewarded, with a particular consideration of the value of non-standard and potentially innovative outputs. It was not clear to the committee how and to what extent the contribution to societal impact plays a role in assessments. The committee understands that, similar to nearly all universities in the Netherlands, this is work in progress and takes place in the context of the national and European movement towards a new balance in the Recognition and Rewards of academics, a movement in which Tilburg University plays an active role.

3.5 Viability

Funding

RSCT has cooperated with the central Grant Support Team to professionalize grant writing practices. Every grant proposal for post-doctoral positions and larger projects is written by a team, consisting of at least the primary researcher, a senior colleague with experience in proposal writing and reviewing, a PhD researcher who lends assistance and gets hands-on training, and another colleague from outside the field of expertise. This has proven highly successful in the recent period, especially at the Dutch level (NWO-related grants capture). The committee highly appreciates the collaborative grant-writing which, while potentially time-consuming, also appears to be an effective way of apprenticing less experienced researchers and ensuring a continuity of expertise.

The consolidation around the defined areas of the RSCT research program has enabled a very fast response to the *Sector plan* funds, resulting in five new assistant professor positions. The committee appreciates the choice for permanent positions (where other institutions focused on temporary postdocs). Moreover, the committee was pleased to hear that the management guarantees that this funding will be used not only to develop new initiatives but also to reduce the workload of the current staff, in particular by arranging a fair distribution of the teaching load. The committee strongly supports this and recommends that the management ensures that this money will be maintained at the local (department) level in the longer term, while cautioning against promoting the research interests of incoming staff at the expense of current mid-career academics.

Human resource policy

At the time of its set-up in 2015, the Department was rather top-heavy, housing many full professors. In the past seven years, there has been a major shift in scientific staff distribution, leading to a better balance between full professors, associate professors and assistant professors. The strategy over the most recent period to employ across all levels of the professional scale while tailoring incoming academic expertise to the aims of the program appears to be a sound policy for consolidating the reputation of the department.

Given the reference in various places in the self-assessment to staff workload and pressures, burnout remains an ever-present danger that must be addressed. The committee recommends developing a structural plan to enable teaching-free periods for RSCT staff but also indicates that such a plan would only partially address the problem and that Tilburg University should invest in a proper research sabbatical policy. The undeniable costs of such a policy are amply compensated for not just by improved rates of retention and the improved quality of life of the employees (which would already be enough in its own right) but also by the positive effect periods of sustained reflection and uncomplicated off-time have on the quality of both teaching and research.

Next to the teaching load, the high number of external PhDs and the high level of support all PhD candidates receive appear to be an important cause for the high workload of the senior staff. The recently implemented policy to request *ius promovendi* for associate professors could help to divide this heavy burden more among more staff members. The committee recommends also finding other ways to decrease the amount of workload related to the supervision of both internal and external PhD candidates (see also paragraph 3.6).

In terms of acknowledging quality and performance at the level of the individual researcher, Tilburg University joined the national 'Recognition and Rewards' initiative in 2020. The committee was pleased to learn that Tilburg University also signed the European 'Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment'. These initiatives aim to create a broader perspective on appreciation of the diverse activities academics undertake. The committee was pleased to note that The Performance, Talent & Development (PT&D) interviews within the Department of Culture Study will not only focus on research output but also on the domains of education, societal impact, leadership and team spirit and stressed that transparency about the use of the new criteria is of great importance.

The Department aims for an open and transparent recruitment process in place with diverse selection committees considering gender diversity, senior-junior distribution, and variation in expertise while also including HR experts. Women are well-represented at the professor and assistant professor level but not at the associate professor level. The committee noted that the management is aware of this issue and intends to address this imbalance. Clarity for all staff about this process will be useful. There appears to be a lower degree of diversity, in terms of ethnicity and under-represented groups generally, within the staff profile than there is, for example, in the PhD cohort. No policy on diversity and recruitment has been articulated that would address this. As this has become a major point of attention for universities across the Netherlands it is surprising not to see more attention for this issue here and reflection on this is encouraged.

Academic culture

As pointed out before, RSCT asserts a management strategy that is horizontally laid out and therefore 'hands-off'. The self-assessment elaborates on this by explaining that scholarship within the RSCT program is structured relatively loosely following a strategy that does not impose one epistemological frame of reference. Various instruments and strategies are in place that serve multiple purposes in fostering different aspects of the research culture and the committee hoped that such practices would allow incoming research staff the same flexibility as has been afforded to current staff. The committee commended the various means in place for staff to "taste each other's bread" and also noted that the practice of collaborative grant-writing increases the quality and success of grant proposals while simultaneously educating less experienced staff and fostering interdisciplinary engagement.

The committee finds the collaborative grant-writing strategy highly effective in fostering interdisciplinary collaborations. This is evidenced by several cooperation's related to the co-supervision of PhD projects with colleagues of TSB (Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences) and DCC (Department of Communication and Cognition). However, the committee feels that there could be more cooperation between the TSHD Departments and that opportunities for such cooperation with, for instance, the Department of Philosophy are clearly available. In addition, there seems to be little real joint work with TSB, which is surprising given that the RSCT program seems emphatically geared more towards social sciences than to more hard-core humanities. The committee would support establishing more collaborations outside the Department and in the School, in particular with the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences. DCU's focus on Health Humanities clearly offers valuable avenues for further exploration in this regard. The committee also suggested that a more strategic engagement in collaborations - for both research and potentially teaching - would help offset falling student numbers in the Humanities and so help sustain future viability.

RSCT has a suitable system in place for dealing with research integrity and ethics. The preparation of a data management plan and getting ethical clearance is obligatory and an integral part of any new project, including MA thesis projects. Assessment and approval are carried out by the School's Research Ethics and Data Management Committee (REDC) (established in 2015). This obligatory procedure helps researchers adhere to the Code of Ethics for Research Involving Human Participants, the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, and the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

RSCT shows a strong involvement in open science. This is illustrated, among others, in the GAIC network, FAIR principles, *Diggit Magazine*, Tilburg Paper in Culture Studies (TPCS), and the active use by individual researchers of open science platforms and opportunities to publish open access. The committee encourages RSCT to pursue the efforts to stimulate open science in all its facets.

3.6 PhD education and training

As described in the self-assessment, the Department distinguishes two categories of PhD candidates. On the one hand, there are the 'internal' PhD candidates who are employed by the Department and consequently have office space and participate fully in the research culture of the Department and the School. Internal PhD students are divided into two sub-categories: those who are funded by the Department, and those who are funded through research grants attached to specific projects, in which they subsequently work as part of a research team. On the other hand, there are the so-called 'external' PhD candidates, who receive supervision from one of the staff members, but are not on the Department payroll and are usually not present on a daily basis. Generally speaking, 'external' PhD candidates either hold a bursary (e.g., Chinese Scholarship Council) or are promising former master students who, because of the lack of funding, wish to start a PhD trajectory under expert academic guidance while waiting for a new round of funding to be issued by NWO. The category of external PhD also provides the opportunity for candidates from socio-politically challenging contexts to take part in the program. Lastly, the 'external' PhD label also includes professionals who have a solid position within their institutional framework but wish to embark on a PhD. Over the past seven years on average 36% of PhD candidates were either internally employed or grant-based, and 64% were external. In 2021 this concerned 29 internally funded or grant-based PhDs and 63 external PhDs.

The committee noted with appreciation that efforts have been made recently to integrate external PhDs into the social and academic life of the department on an equal basis with internal PhDs.

All PhD candidates are enrolled in the TSHD Graduate School for Humanities and Digital Sciences (GS). The GS informs PhD candidates on relevant matters and keeps track of their progress and well-being through monitoring talks. At the start of the PhD project, PhD candidates compose a Training and Supervision Plan (mandatory since 2019) together with their supervisors. The mandatory training program for PhD candidates consists of courses in Research Ethics and Data Management issues. In principle, all PhD candidates receive weekly or twice-monthly supervision and have at least two supervisors.

Since 2021, external PhD candidates are enrolled in the GS as *prospective* candidates. At the end of the first year, the supervisor(s) and the prospective candidate evaluate the progress of the project in a meeting. The progress and the output of the prospective candidate are also reviewed by two external assessors. The external PhD candidate can only officially enroll in the GS based on a positive assessment after the first year. The committee appreciates these increasing efforts to embed external candidates in the Department and the more selective procedure to be formally admitted as an external PhD candidate. However, while recognizing the benefits of accepting external PhD candidates, the committee has some concerns about the current high numbers and the pressure this places on the Department in terms of ensuring both a healthy workload (of supervisors) and the quality of PhD supervision and success (of external *and* internal candidates). The committee recommends monitoring this carefully and

developing a proactive policy to avoid staff members being overburdened by supervision tasks for external PhDs.

At the present level, the *quantity* of supervision not only places an unsustainable burden on the (daily) supervisors, but also may not improve the *quality* of supervision – and indeed may be counterproductive in some ways, by increasing dependency on individual supervisors, and decreasing independence and participation in a wider collegial network.

During the site visit, the committee met with enthusiastic and committed representatives of different types of PhD candidates. The PhD candidates appreciate their work environment and the support and encouragement they receive from their supervisor and other staff members. They indicated that they meet their supervisor weekly or twice-monthly for a formal meeting, or they enjoy a looser arrangement, where they see each other daily at the office. Overall, the PhD candidates were pleased with the frequency and the quality of supervision they received. They also appreciate the opportunities to teach and consider this a valuable part of their development as professionals. However, some potential issues were raised with respect to part-time (external) PhD candidates and the difficulties in meeting the requirements of their professional work while completing their PhD in the allocated time. In addition, concerns were expressed regarding the potential additional workload of (internal) PhD candidates working as part of funded research projects, particularly with respect to executing administrative project tasks. There is a potential conflict here between the ambitions of prospective candidates and the funding-acquisition activities of the staff whose projects they are affiliated with. In particular, some PhD candidates appear to find themselves in a position where they are constantly having to seek short-term funding while carrying out their research. This is a rather vulnerable and high-risk strategy. While the committee can offer no specific solution to this , the committee suggests that gaps in funding for individual students should be carefully monitored, and that a wider evaluation be undertaken of the policy of recruiting candidates without full funding for the duration of their training.

The committee has the overall impression that the PhD training program is solid with many different aspects of education, training and supervision carefully considered. The committee acknowledges the intensified role of the GS and the recent developments of the GS that have considerably contributed to a now more solid PhD training program. Despite this overall positive view on the PhD training program, the committee would like to address several points of attention.

Firstly, the committee considers weekly, or even twice-monthly, supervision meetings to be more than necessary and very time-consuming for the supervisors. It seems this requirement could be adapted to lighten the workload of the supervisors. Similarly, while the policy of promoting co-authorship between supervisors and PhD students is potentially of great benefit to both, the implications for academics' workloads need to be seriously considered. Also, the power dynamics of co-authorship between supervisors and PhD students should be reflected on when deciding role division and first authorship.

Secondly, the committee noted that the self-assessment is primarily focused on ensuring policies regarding the academic quality and success (rates) of PhD research projects. Based on the self-assessment it is unclear how the Department (pro-actively and structurally) acts on

improving the social, emotional, and (mental) health-related well-being of PhD candidates. According to the committee, it is important to acknowledge that (personal) well-being is not only important for PhD candidates, but also for the Department. The committee was therefore pleased to learn during the site visit that PhD candidates can go to different persons for personal questions or well-being issues, including the PhD coordinator, the PhD confidential advisor, and the PhD psychologist.

Thirdly, the committee noted that the self-assessment report does not seem to do full justice to PhD candidates being an integral part of the academic staff. The committee missed their voice and input in the self-assessment, though they were provided with a dedicated session for feedback during the site visit. During these interviews, the PhD candidates mentioned feeling somewhat excluded at some points, and that they were not always well informed about what is going on in the Department. The committee advises informing PhD candidates in a more structured way about Departmental policies and developments.

Fourthly, the committee suggested that more vocational preparation could be provided for PhD candidates not intending to stay in academia after graduation and, in particular, it was suggested that means of preparing these PhD candidates for careers in secondary teaching would be beneficial for the PhD candidates as well as for the Dutch education sector. To this end, teaching opportunities for PhD candidates could be made more generally available.

Finally, the committee encourages the program to develop an action plan on how to embed valuable initiatives with a social component, such as peer events, more structurally in the program. While supportive peer events have been initiated since early-2021, these have merely been singular, small-scale events organized by individual staff members (e.g., 'meet and greet' events and the 'shut up and write' meetings).

Appendix A - Program of the site visit

Wednesday 19 October 2022

Time	Part
17.00 – 19.00	Preparatory committee meeting
19.00	Dinner

Thursday 20 October 2022

Time	Part
08.30 - 8.50	Welcome by TSHD board:
08.50 – 09.00	Break
9.00 – 09.45	Meeting with Research Management
09.45 – 10.15	Break and time for deliberation
10.15 – 11.00	Meeting with senior staff
11.00 – 11.10	Break
11.10 – 11.50	Meeting with junior staff
12.00 – 12.45	Lunch
13.00 – 13.40	Meeting with PhD candidates
13.40 – 13.50	Break
13.50 – 14.30	Meeting with Diggit Magazine
14.30 – 15.00	Time for deliberation
15.00 – 15.30	Meeting with TSHD board and DCU management:
15.30 - 17.00	Time for deliberation
17.00 – 18.00	Informal presentation preliminary findings

Appendix B- Quantitative data

Research staff in fte

	2015 #	FTE^2	2016 #	FTE^2	2017 #	FTE^2	2018 #	FTE^2	2019 #	FTE^2	2020 #	FTE^2	2021 #	FTE^2
Scientif staff	36	8.96	27	7.17	29	8.61	28	8.50	27	8.21	27	7.89	27	8.16
Full professor	16	4.43	13	3.70	14	4.39	13	3.98	13	3.51	11	2.96	9	2.26
Associate professor	6	1.40	4	1.33	6	1.53	6	1.99	6	2.03	7	2.38	9	2.70
Assistant professor	14	3.13	10	2.14	9	2.69	9	2.53	8	2.67	9	2.55	9	3.17
Post-doctoral researchers	8	3.35	10	3.89	9	4.35	8	2.51	9	4.56	7	4.32	7	4.54
PhD candidates (-internal)	29 (16)	7.81	27 (14)	6.67	25 (12)	6.37	26 (11)	7.38	26 (12)	8.85	24 (14)	9.79	24 (13)	9.34
Total research staff	73	20.12	64	17.73	63	19.66	62	18.39	62	21.62	58	22.00		22.01

Funding and expenditure[1]

	2016 FTE	%	2016 FTE	%	2017 FTE	%	2018 FTE	%	2019 FTE	%	2020 FTE	%	2021 FTE	%
Funding														
Government funding	18.36	91.3	15.00	84.6	15.76	82.0	13.19	71.7	15.33	70.9	13.87	63.0	11.70	53.2
Research grants	1.34	6.7	1.00	5.6	1.63	8.5	3.70	20.1	4.91	22.7	7.12	32.3	8.57	38.9
Contract research	0.42	2.0	1.73	9.8	1.84	9.5	1.40	7.7	1.38	6.4	1.01	4.7	1.74	7.9
Total funding	20.12	100	17.73	100	19.23	100	18.29	100	21.62	100	22.00	100	22.01	100
Expenditure	K€	%	K€	%	K€	%	K€	%	K€	%	K€	%	K€	%
Personnel costs	2.182	87	3.565	90	n/a[2]	n/a[2]	3.561	95	3.999	97	3.717	98	3.659	93
Other costs[3]	335	13	372	10	n/a[2]	n/a[2]	203	5	122	3	66	2	279 [4]	7
Total expenditure	2.517	100	3.937	100	n/a[2]	n/a[2]	3.764	100	4.121	100	3.783	100	100	3.938

[1] FTE numbers reflect allocated research time whereas expenditure refers to total expenditure for scientific staff (including teaching staff).

[2] Due to internal shifts in the TSHD Finance & Control staff this information is not available.

[3] For instance inventory and equipment (including depreciation), books and literature, travel and accommodation expenses, representation costs, information costs, consumption costs, education and research.

[4] The other costs in 2021 are higher than in previous years because this amount includes incidental compensation for the supervision of several PhD candidates by staff from the Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences after the demise of their supervisor.