To:	Executive Board Tilburg University
From:	Faculty Board Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences
Subject:	Administrative Response Research Assessment Research Program *Rapid Social and Cultural Transformation: Online & Offline 2015-2021*, Department of Culture Studies
Date:	May 8th 2023

Introduction

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 and ritual studies, and literary studies. The interdisciplinary research program aims to explore how digitalization and globalization have consequences for social, cultural, and artistic practices. On October 20, 2022 the site visit for the research assessment of the research program took place.

A committee, consisting of the following members, visited Tilburg University for this research assessment:

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

The committee that conducted the review formulated its findings and recommendations in their report (appendix 1). At the request of the TiU Executive Board, the TSHD Board shares its reactions to the conclusions and recommendations of the committee for the research program RSCT in this memo. 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 the Faculty Board, the management team DCU, selections of senior and junior researchers, and PhD candidate representatives.

Assessment Rapid Social and Cultural Transformation: Online & Offline

The committee was requested to assess the quality of research conducted by the research group 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.

The Board of TSDH very much appreciates the thorough and constructive comments of the committee as documented in their assessment report, and is pleased to learn that, besides some critical remarks, the committee is overall positive about the program. In the section below the main observations regarding the SEP criteria are mentioned. For a full overview, we would like to refer to the attached report of the committee. We finalize this memo by mentioning the recommendations for further improvement in the future and the response of the Management (program and School level) to these recommendations. We would like to note that the FB, together with the DCU management team, is currently looking into the optimal way of organizing and managing the department. One of the reasons is the diminished financial space of the Department. The results of this process may also influence the way in which the recommendations of the committee are implemented.

Research quality

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. Over the reporting period (2015-2021), 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 encyclopaedias, 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. 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. 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 committee concludes that the RSCT program has become a robust programme that houses a solid community of both senior and junior researchers. The increased focus on online offline sociation and rapid socio-cultural transformations as both convincing and well designed to promote the distinctive expertise and contributions of this 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 as of April / September 2023. Furthermore, the collaborative grant-writing approach has proven highly successful in the recent period, especially at the national level (NWO-related grants capture) and is an excellent strategy for developing the grant-writing experience and skills of junior staff.

Societal Relevance

RSCT 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 the impact on the funerary industry due to the active participation in the Funerary Academy as well as the impact on multilingual education as well as with policies aimed at the tailor made integration process of 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.

Viability

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 not solely for the single individual appointed through this scheme but also, based on the solidarity principle that we have in place at DCU, to reduce the workload of current staff members, in particular by arranging a fair distribution of the teaching load. The committee strongly supports this and recommends the management to ensure that this money will be maintained at the local (departmental) level in the longer term, while cautioning against promoting the research interests of incoming staff at the expense of current mid-career scholars.

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 both the national as well as international 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. 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 senior staff members.

Academic culture
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 and methodological frame of reference. Various instruments and strategies are in place that serve multiple purposes in fostering different aspects of an ongoing and growing interdisciplinary research culture. The committee hoped that such practices would allow incoming research staff the same flexibility as has been afforded to current staff.

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 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 (Web of Science; Taverne licensing; Research Gate) and opportunities to publish open access. The committee encourages RSCT to pursue the efforts to stimulate open science in all its facets.

PhD education and training
In 2021, the RSCT program supervised 29 internally funded or grant- holding PhD candidates as well as 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.

Recommendations (summarized)

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.

> *Response Management TSHD (Program Management Team and School Board)*
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> Over the years DCU researchers benefit from the necessary scientific, epistemological and methodological freedom so to set their own research agendas in line with departmental aims. The recent sector plan resources enabled the management team to take concrete measures to refocus and restructure the department's curriculum and research planning. Without harming the horizontal management approach, top-down and bottom-up decision making processes were already employed to collectively decide upon the future direction of the department. Using the sector plan resources for heritage culture theme, two master track coordinators were invited to write a text on the future of digitalization, platformization and heritage culture. All members of the department discussed the vision text and determined the research profiles needed for the future research focus of the department and five new assistant professors were recruited based on the profiles constructed collectively. This also resulted in concrete changes in the curriculum. Together with new employees and existing staff, the management team restructured the curriculum. Art and Media, Digital Culture and Global communication programs are fully revised to reprofile DCU in line with the societal needs. This is an ongoing change, but already major changes were made since the visitation report.
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> Thanks to the resources offered by the sector plan, new associate professor appointments will be possible. In line with the departmental focus and the needs, those assistant professor candidates who meet the criteria of Dutch UFO profiles and the criteria of the rewards and recognition program will be nominated for promotions. The management team pays attention not only to vertical career development but also to horizontal growth within the department.

- 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.

> *Response Management TSHD (Program Management Team and School Board)*
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> There are already valorization and collaboration activities, both in the Brabant Region as well at a national and international level.

The impact of DCU researchers is seen even in the report of Dutch Senate (Eerste Kamer, (2022) *Gelijk recht doen: Een parlementair onderzoek naar de mogelijkheden van de wetgever om discriminatie tegen te gaan*).

Strategically, we intend there to proceed as follows:
1) Define together with TSHD a common understanding for Societal Relevance
2) Gather through the help of student assistants all the current running initiatives we have going
3) Make sure that DCU scholars showcase their societal relevance via PURE as well as via other socio-technological platforms such as LinkedIn and Instagram.
4) Spot the gaps in what we already do and what is needed according to the working definition of Societal Relevance at School level

In so doing, we believe we manage to formulate an effective cost sustainable departmental societal relevance strategy.

- 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

Response Management TSHD (Program Management Team and School Board)

The program leader Research will draft a departmental strategy, together with the management team DCU. Of course, this strategy will be aligned with the School strategy.

- 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.

Response Management TSHD (Program Management Team and School Board)

In line with University and School policies, each researcher is encouraged to document all relevant activities geared towards societal impact and have this taken into account in promotion procedures and the annual evaluation with the staff within the initiative Recognition and Rewards**,** in the same way as traditional output indicators.

- Building on existing links with other departments, 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.

Response Management TSHD (Program Management Team and School Board)

We will strategically invest in the Research Trainee program and School's seed money program to explore opportunities for collaboration with other scholars across Schools (see current applications for 2023 from Yagmur and Hou together with Bender (TSB); Stogianni, Bender (TSB), Yagmur; Shahin together with Schiffelers and van den Boom (TILT), as well as Heynders and Huber with (TLS).

Further explore structural areas where sustained cooperation in terms of joint grant applications and joint teaching initiatives are a tangibly positive financial opportunity for the DCU (see for instance the newly born cooperation with TiCeLS). Further, at university level we will continue our longstanding key role in the Honours Programme (co-ordinator van de Ven) and, when made possible and clear invest in the TiU initiative on Academische Werkplaats (coordinator Swanenberg)

- 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.

Response Management TSHD (Program Management Team and School Board)

Sector plan resources gave a major impetus for refocusing DCU research and education. Due to shortage of available funds for recruitment, the department had little room for maneuver and could not take up new challenges. With the sector plan funding, DCU was able to construct a brand-new strategy to reorient research and education activities. Collectively department members constructed a new plan for the next five years titled "Digital futures: Platformization and Cultural heritage". In this new vision text, cultural heritage and digitalization became the focus of DCU research and education because there is the societal need for understanding how digitalization effects the production of culture and how cultural heritage effects the production of specific technologies answering specific needs. In the next five years, we will focus on understanding cultural heritage in a post-digital world from a perspective on the future. In line with this goal, we identified five focus areas that also guided our recruitment process, namely, Digital literacies, Discourse and Cultural practices; Digital art and Media Studies; Critical heritage studies, Innovation and Curation; Creative industries, Popular culture and Future Heritage; and finally, Identity and intercultural differences. Since the visitation report, the recruitment process has been completed and DCU has now five promising young scholars who perfectly share the new departmental ambitions. The new appointees definitely bring in new fire for joint projects and initiatives. The sector plan resources ensure the employment of these new colleagues for the next ten years. By recruiting 5 new people without increasing student numbers, this also creates more rest and space for the other wp-ers.

- 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.

> ***Response Management TSHD (Program Management Team and School Board)***
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> There are a number of initiatives that can be mentioned in this perspective. TSHD has invested in a committee on sustainable research and education in which, among other things, a realistic task allocation is being looked at. In addition, a committee has been started at the TiU level to look at whether the academic year can be set up "smarter". More room for teaching-free blocks could be one of the outcomes.
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> Within DCU, reduction of the teaching load is achieved by limiting the number of courses the department teaches and making good use of the new hirings. Since the visitation report, several developments took place. A task force was set up to look into curriculum and the viability of the education program. This is an ongoing work which will possibly result in some concrete measures to reshuffle the academic program for higher student numbers and less teaching load for some scholars. Sector plan recruitments will lower the heavy teaching load of some senior scholars already in the next semester. Based on a standardized task division model, fair and equitable work division will be achieved. However, there are still some challenges such as subject specialization of some colleagues being less relevant and some subjects being less attractive for current student populations. In very few cases in which less teaching load is observed, such colleagues will do more thesis supervision so that equity principle is ensured.

- Develop a structural plan to enable all staff to have at least one teaching-free period per academic year

> ***Response Management TSHD (Program Management Team and School Board)***
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> See also the input above.
> This goes hand in hand with the insight the MT is currently building on task divisions, making sure through this measure, to ease the burden evenly among DCU members, looking at how we can best as a department plan and use this teaching free block(s), e.g., working on a major publication, working on a grant application, working on someone's own scholarly development.

- Decrease the amount of workload related to the supervision of large numbers of PhD candidates.

> ***Response Management TSHD (Program Management Team and School Board)***
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> Compliance with the rules set up by the Graduate School regarding the conditions under which an external PhD student may be registered will ensure that the inflow of new external PhD candidates is under control and also that these external PhD candidates will be embedded within the research of the Department.
> Opportunities for an ius promovendi for associate professors will be expanded, which will reduce the workload.

- Inform PhD candidates in a more structured way about Departmental policies and developments.

> **Response Management TSHD (Program Management Team and School Board)**
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> We continue to plan regular research meetings (at least 3 per semester) where there is also time for providing information and discussing strategic policy developments at whole departmental level hence fostering a bottom-up approach to top-down issues. Besides, in cooperation with the Program Leader, the Graduate School is conducting individual interviews with each PhD candidate to monitor supervision activities and to reflect on individual needs and issues.

- Develop a policy to improve the composition of the research staff regarding ethnic diversity.

> **Response Management TSHD (Program Management Team and School Board)**
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> We wish to set for the current practice. In fact, the department has an international staff; and the new hires have increased DCU's linguistic and cultural diversity even further. We, as DCU, believe that we ought to orient in the future toward the inclusion of academically underrepresented groups, such as ethnolinguistic minority groups and LGBTQ+. Yet again, this is strongly dependent on the funds available at School and University level. Besides, individual research profiles of the candidates and match with the departmental needs inevitably guide the decision making of search committees.