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**Administrative Response to the Midterm Review of the Research Program
Rapid Social and Cultural Transformation: Online and Offline
Department of Culture Studies 2018**

By the Board of the Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences

Determined by the Board of TSHD on March 12, 2019

On October 17, 2018 the site visit for the Midterm Review of the *Department of Culture Studies'* (DCU) Research Program of the *Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences* (TSHD) took place, for the period 2015-2017. The committee that conducted the review formulated its findings in their report. The Board of TSDH very much appreciates the efforts of the committee and the assessment report as a result of that. It is pleased with the assessment, resulting in a score of '2' (very good) for each aspect. At the request of the TiU Executive Board the TSHD Board shares the administrative response to the conclusions and recommendations of the committee below.

The DCU research program *Rapid Social and Cultural Transformation: Online and Offline* has been established to integrate three previous research groups: *Religion and Ritual*, *Language and Globalization* and *Literature and Visual Art in the European Public Sphere*. This merger was created to increase and capitalize on possible synergies between the former groups. The midterm review has been organized to review the research of this integral program halfway after its start in 2015. This way the program can timely make adjustments where necessary based on the findings and recommendations of the intermediate evaluation before the final research assessment 2021.

The Midterm Review was conducted by an international committee that was composed specifically for this goal, under chairmanship of Prof.dr. Sirpa Lepänen (University of Jyväskylä, Finland). The other members of the committee were Prof.dr. Dirk De Geest (Universiteit van Leuven, Belgium) and Prof.dr. Rodney Jones (University of Reading, United Kingdom). Prior to the site-visit the committee was provided with a self-assessment report and additional relevant information concerning the program.

The assessment of the committee is described in a report that was offered to the Board of TSHD on December 18, 2018. In this report the committee described its findings according to the Standard Evaluation Protocol (SEP) 2015-2021. The committee based its assessment on the SEP five-point scale *world leading/excellent* (1), *very good* (2), *good* (3) and *unsatisfactory* (4) regarding the aspects *research quality*, *relevance to society* and *vitality*. Following the SEP, the committee also included the PhD training program, research integrity and diversity in its assessment.

General findings

The committee appreciates the combination of the three former research groups and recognizes the topicality of the focus of the program. According to the assessment of the committee the full potential of the synergy has not yet been fully achieved. A combination of bottom-up and top-down strategies are required to establish a truly collaborative and interdisciplinary research culture within the program. These strategies entail the mobilization of the dialogic development of insights and innovations by the researchers and PhD students, and the vision, strategic guidance and support by the management. Besides that, the program should find ways to articulate how it is a continuation or further development of the previous work done in the department. Furthermore, despite the formulation of the vision and goals of the program in a forward-looking and interesting way, the committee recommends that the key points and foci be formulated in a more concrete and detailed manner to further strengthen the vision and goals and better guide the work of the individual researchers. The Board of the TSHD acknowledges these recommendations and takes them to heart.

Research quality

The committee was pleased with the publication record of the research group, which includes many high-quality publications in highly ranked journals and some publications of exceptional quality. Besides the journal articles the publication record covers a balanced range of publication categories, which also includes books, book chapters and other types of output. The research group has managed to achieve a very international orientation, with a main focus on output in the English language. The committee recommends to further accentuate the international orientation by expanding to other languages (French or German) to create a more genuine (European) international profile.

Following up this recommendation, the department continues its current practice to support individual responsibility for selecting the output types that researchers deem suitable for their field and ambition. In the case of PhD students, this also means that supervisors guide their students in such decisions.

Despite the impressive publication record the committee signaled a slight decline of the research output in all categories. The committee believes this development is due to the increasing teaching and administrative load, as well as to the increased efforts to write funding applications. As a recommendation the committee urges the department to take appropriate measures to ensure that researchers have the time, support and facilities to continue publishing.

The Board of TSHD regrettably recognizes this trend in the other departments and in academic Humanities institutions in the Netherlands.

The management of the department continues safeguarding the availability of 35% research time for all researchers and stimulates the types of peer support that helps generate high-quality output, especially internal discussion of draft papers and presentations.

As described in the self-evaluation report, in general the success rate in funding in the Humanities and Social Sciences is rather low. The percentages of funding based on research grants (1,63 fte in 2017) and contract research (2,14 fte in 2017) have been relatively stable over the review period. It is noteworthy that the department has been successful in attracting two staff members each of whom recently received a prestigious major personal grant (a VENI and a VICI grant, respectively), a WOTRO project and a number of smaller funds (in collaboration with social stakeholders).

The department will continue to be active in funding acquisition and counts on the support of the School to further professionalize acquisition activities regarding huge grants and consortia.

The committee was not entirely convinced yet of the realization of the interdisciplinarity of the research program. During the site-visit the committee learned that there already are several promising examples of interdisciplinary research projects, in which the PhDs play an important role. As a recommendation, the research group should increase the visibility of these collaborations and make them more explicit. In general, the interdisciplinarity of the research culture should be enhanced, adding to the strength and unique profile of this program compared to other units that focus on the topics digitalization and globalization.

In order to achieve this, further efforts in team-building are required and researchers in different areas need to find common interests and should attempt to create alliances with researchers in the other departments within TSHD. The committee acknowledges that the research group could carve a niche within TiU's three Impact Themes.

The committee encourages discussions on the theoretical meaning and empirical consequences of interdisciplinarity. This should be made more explicit to increase the programs coherence and establish a clear profile in the (inter)national context.

The department recognizes that interdisciplinarity is a goal to be further pursued, and that many steps need to be taken to advance on the path towards that goal. Specifically, it will increase efforts to foster internal discussion, by organizing more seminars and opportunities for commenting on each other's work. The guiding philosophy is that interdisciplinarity is best served by constant exposure to different perspectives and approaches. Joint work on specific themes in groups of researchers is seen as a logical next step to reinforce a really interdisciplinary research culture.

Relevance to society

The focus of the program is very timely and relevant and, according to the committee, the department takes serious efforts to disseminate knowledge to a broader public. The committee acknowledges that a great deal of the programs' work has great potential for societal impact. Many of the members publish for the general public and serve as experts that are consulted and receive exposure in diverse media outlets. Despite the amount of exposure, it is not entirely clear to the committee to which extent this contributes to the visibility of the department, and not only to that of the individual researchers. An overall strategy in this regard is lacking. The department could clearly benefit from a more proactive approach. Part of this approach should be the formulation of a concrete set of criteria defining different types of impact. This strategy could also contribute to the prioritization of social interactions and develop increasingly durable partnerships with relevant actors and parties.

The department will use the midterm review as a starting point for developing a new strategy for knowledge dissemination. An inventory of past and current practices as laid down in the self-report will be used to develop a strategy document listing best practices and presenting an implementation plan for the next years. This will also review the opportunities for involving stakeholders more systematically. A special task group will be set up for this task.

Another point for improvement lies in the enhancing of ways to collaborate with digital actors. These could function as co-researchers, collaborators and community and network liaisons instead of solely informants and research subjects.

The department has created its own platform for knowledge dissemination by means of the online *Diggit Magazine*. The committee considers this magazine as a very promising and innovative project that has already had a strong educational impact and a great deal of potential to transform scholarly publication practices. As a recommendation, the department should

continue to develop the magazine and fully seize the opportunity to conduct interdisciplinary research on online publishing, public debate and interaction with audiences.

The department sees DiggIt Magazine as one of its main strengths and will continue to develop it and invest in it. This is on the ongoing agenda of the DiggIt editorial team.

Viability

Regarding the viability, the committee is impressed by the vibrant and dynamic research culture and the efforts to gain more research funding. The SWOT analysis in the self-assessment was presented clearly. However, there needs to be awareness for the potential risks and threats, such as the risk of losing both staff and funding. The program management needs to engage in a more explicit strategic planning to face these possible treats. The committee recommends setting up a strategy group that includes a diverse delegation of the research community in the department.

Besides that, a strategic recruitment plan is required to anticipate the retirement of key staff members. This development should be used as an opportunity to attract new scholars with the expertise matching the core areas of the program: digitalization and globalization. Despite the prospective attraction of new scholars with the relevant expertise the committee notes that the number of personal seems to have reached its peak. Consequently, each member should actively contribute to the overall aims of the department. Given the numeric limitations in staff, the department can gain from interdisciplinary alliances outside the department or university to realize joint projects and publications.

The department is happy to accept the recommendation to set up a strategy group, consisting of early, mid- and late stage career researchers representing the breadth of disciplines and research interests represented in the department. Their task will be to identify strong and weak points and translate this analysis into a concrete list of must-have activities leading to further profiling of the department as a whole. The aim is to strengthen the core expertise areas and to identify gaps in the personnel structure, and as such to develop a strategy regarding hiring preferences in the near future.

The committee congratulates the department on its success in attracting your scholars bringing in their own substantial research funding. Although the entire program clearly benefits from this, the committee points at the tension between collective projects and individual careers. The impact of this tension is pointed at in the SWOT analysis, but is being underestimated according to the committee. Careful planning by the management is required.

Regarding the funding in general, the strategy to obtain external funding needs to be further developed. The committee encourages the continuation of the efforts to professionalize the acquisition structure. It applauds the construction to set up a writing team for every major grant proposal but points at the already limited time that is available to do research. This again requires strategic planning of the management to secure the means needed for all staff members to seriously invest in research and publishing.

The department is aware of the pressure on research time, an issue that touches almost all researchers in the Netherlands and elsewhere. Not working on grant proposals is not an option, so efforts to structure the work on these proposals will be continued, in such a way that the work itself leads to useful outcomes beside the actual proposal, in the form of increased interdisciplinary expertise, more synergy between researchers, increased experience in what it takes to write a successful proposal, and, where appropriate, joint work. These forms of output are taken to hold inherent benefits for the career prospects of the involved researchers.

PhD program

The committee was impressed by the high quality and enthusiasm of the PhD candidates. As mentioned earlier, these PhD candidates play an important role in developing an interdisciplinary research culture. The candidates that the committee spoke with are positive about the training opportunities, flexible informal atmosphere and the weekly peer meetings, during which they can discuss their work. The committee concludes that the internal structure of the PhD program is sound and constructive. Although the committee appreciates the low-profile and flexible research environment, it recommends the management to better structure the information provision to PhD candidates to make sure they know about the regulations and expectations concerning their studies.

The TSHD Board is pleased to hear that the efforts to better structure the PhD program paid off, to contribute to a solid and inspiring environment for PhD candidates to do their work. The department will work with the Graduate School and the Research Board to make sure that PhD students get informed about ethics and data management requirements at the start of their project. This will be part of a larger project with the aim of quality control and – improvement of the PhD trajectories in which all categories of PhD candidates (internal, external and scholarships) are included.

Research Integrity

Both at TiU and TSHD level, several measures have been taken to improve and adjust the research ethics policy to make sure that the policy that is further developed in the School is in line with the institution policy. The assessment committee is pleased with the efforts that have been taken but noticed that the PhD candidates are not fully aware of these developments and the implications for their research practice. The committee supports the intended implementation of mandatory courses that address these matters.

The TSHD Board confirms the further development of the policy regarding research ethics and data management in the next years.

Diversity

The committee recognizes the research groups emphasis on diversity given the focus on multiculturalism and gender in much of its research. Still, the committee notes that additional effort is required to achieve a better balance in this regard but is convinced by the motivation of the department to attract new scholars who contribute to the diversity of the program.

The TSHD Board endorses this ambition for the entire School and will continue its efforts to contribute to this goal, by carrying out its specific policy regarding attracting and maintaining a diverse research population. Naturally this covers all departments, including DCU, which has its own additional interest and motivation to establish a diverse research community.

Summary

The TSHD Board and the DCU department adopt a large number of recommendations that were described in the report. Most recommendations are tackled by setting up a strategy group. Its task will be to translate the recommendations into concrete suggestions for the daily life on the work floor and for future planning priorities.

In the near future the following starting points will be included in the development of the School and department policy.

Research strategy

- Engage in more explicit strategic planning by creating a strategy group representing staff with different kinds of expertise and representing researchers in different stages of their careers.
- Foster a more collaborative and interdisciplinary research culture by showing strong leadership effectively using both bottom-up and top-down strategies.
- Continue the discussions on what interdisciplinarity means and what the repercussions are in terms of the empirical work of the department.
- Formulate a more explicit perspective on what should be the core theoretical and empirical topics and questions related to the research within the program on digitalization and globalization.
- Carve a research niche within the university-level profiling areas and develop interdisciplinary research with actors and groups in these fields within the context of the university.
- Devise a recruitment plan which strengthens the expertise in the core areas of digitalization and globalization.

Knowledge utilization

- Enhance the visibility of interdisciplinary collaborations and demonstrate this explicitly in the documentation and public promotion of the department.
- Formulate a clear overall societal relevance strategy that is more proactive than simply making research results available. In order to better articulate the impact of the department, the formulation of a concrete set of criteria defining different types of impact is needed.

Integrity and ethics

- Inform PhD students in a more structured way about the regulations and expectations related to their projects
- Continue paying attention to research integrity and research ethics among all PhD students and staff members.

PhD program

- Investigate what the exact reasons are for delay in completing PhD's and take further measures that will lead to a substantial increase in the number of post-graduates completing their PhD in four years; this specifically applies to external PhD students.
- Investigate what the underlying reasons are for the (relative) decline in research output and take proper measures to ensure that research staff will have enough time, support and resources to publish.
- Devise a strategic plan to secure the resources and opportunities needed for all staff members in different positions and career stages to be able to seriously invest in research and publishing.
- Devise a realistic and productive practical approach to stimulate both collectively and individually research, including a publication strategy for developing joint publication projects.

