

The Evaluation Committee, led by prof. Sijtsma, has assessed the research of eight Dutch psychology institutes over the period 2017 – 2022. The Committee’s main conclusion is that “Dutch academic psychological research is in excellent shape, excelling in both overall research quality and the societal significance of its findings”, and that this excellence is to a large extent thanks to our international focus.

We are very pleased to hear that the efforts made by us, and our colleagues in Amsterdam, Leiden, Utrecht, Rotterdam, Maastricht and Heerlen are recognized and appreciated by the Committee. In this document, we respond to the Committee’s assessment of the University of Groningen’s Heymans Institute for Psychological Research (HI).

In general, the Committee is very positive about our institute. According to the Committee, “the HI enjoys international recognition for the impressive quality and quantity of its research” and “HI researchers have an impact on [various fields], in each case reaching a wide audience.” Our unique location in the country and our role within the ‘University of the North’ are also recognized by the Committee. On several other topics the Committee is extremely positive as well. Our response to all these comments is concise: we fully agree with the Committee.

The Committee makes several recommendations –aimed both at our institute and at psychology in the Netherlands as a whole - and asks us to reflect on them. These recommendations will take several years to implement, so a full reflection can be expected in the self-assessment 2023-2029, but we can already share our initial thoughts. Below we summarize each recommendation in italics, and give our initial response. We start by responding to the Groningen-specific comments, followed by a reflection on the ten recommendations made for all institutions.

These responses were written by Casper Albers, research director HI, and Kees Aarts, dean faculty BSS, and approved by the College van Bestuur, April 2024.

Reflection on comments aimed at the Heymans Institute

Restructure the units, limiting the number and levelling their size

Nine research units is indeed considerably more than what the seven other institutions have – where the number of units range from three to six. This might give the impression that things in Groningen are fundamentally different arranged from other institutions, but these numbers give a somewhat misleading impression. For instance, the Vrije Universiteit only has three units (there called departments), but each unit is separated into several sections. The number of sections at the VU is comparable to the number of units at the HI.

The large number of units also has advantages. Being part of a relatively small group contributes to the sense of belonging of our staff members. The only unit where the small size and, especially, the fact that only one full professor works in that unit, is a hindrance, is Theory & History of Psychology. We are investigating whether this unit can merge with that of Psychometrics & Statistics into a medium-sized unit.

Furthermore, there have indeed been too many meetings where all units were represented, which were not always effective. To overcome this, it has been decided to disband the (teaching based) Programme Committee and to restructure the Heymans Institute Advisory Council. This will alleviate the administrative burden of the chairs of units and make decision-making processes more effective.

From talks with the chairs and several members of all units, it has become clear that a further reduction in number of units might resolve some issues that the PRC indicated, but at the same time will introduce new disadvantages. In the first half of 2024, the HI director will continue talks with staff of the department to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of reorganization, also making use of the expertise on reorganizations of our colleagues in the organizational psychology group.

Fulfill the demand for clearer rules and expectations, especially regarding PhD theses and support for PhD candidates

Since a couple of years, the faculty board and the research support department put considerably more effort than before in improving and harmonizing the faculty's rules and regulations, as well as in communicating how these can be found on the intranet. This is a massive task, and far from finished, but there is consensus that much progress has already been made (also after 31 December 2022, the end of the review period). Since a couple of years, researchers who obtain the *ius promovendi* are invited for an interview with the director of the graduate school, where the regulations and expectations surrounding PhD-supervision is explained in detail. We are confident that with ongoing efforts, this issue will be resolved within a few more years.

Regarding what we expect from PhD-thesis: we have made the conscious choice not to quantify requirements (e.g. "at least four accepted papers, of which at least one in a Q1-journal"). In line with the recognition and rewards-movement, we think that quality should not be overquantified. In addition, in some fields writing a book as a PhD thesis is perfectly acceptable.

It is clear from the Committee's report, that not every PhD-supervisor is aware of what is expected from a PhD-thesis, and thus cannot provide proper guidance to their PhD-students. Together with the graduate school and PhD council, we will investigate where the causes of unclarity lie and will improve communication to supervisors.

On p.42 of the report, the PRC advises to use available resources to gain more insight into the reasons behind COVID-related delays and to “decide whether policy adjustments are necessary to be more proactive”. This has already been done. As indicated in the self-evaluation, a total of 170 months extensions was granted to PhD-students due to covid-related reasons. Each extension has been given after receiving a detailed motivation on the reasons behind the delay. Some faculty wide regulations, e.g. that on care leave, have been updated based on this input.

A comment regarding more clarity surrounding the PhD-trajectory was made for each of the participating institutes. The lack of (perceived) clarity and guidance for PhD-students thus seems to be a broader issue than just a Groningen-based one. In March 2024, the research directors of the eight institutes came together to discuss potential ways to improve this on a national level.

Make the consequences of discontinuing the tenure track system clearer, and work on solutions for the (perceived) limited career perspective of assistant professors

The research assessment period overlapped with the period in which the faculty transitioned from a highly individualized, open and encompassing tenure track system (from UD up to and including full professor) to strategic personnel planning. As various parties, such as the Faculty Council, have a say in faculty policies, it was not clear during the time of interviews, what the new policy would look like. In early 2024, the new policy has been finalized and it will now be communicated with all staff members.

Compared to the tenure track system, the new system of strategic personnel planning definitely limits the career perspectives of assistant professors within their group, and it’s important that we are also transparent about this. We move from a system where someone could get promotion to associate and full professor when certain individual targets were met, to a system where the most important requirement for promotion is that the department also has the need and the financial means for an additional associate professor.

We are striving for a ‘culture change’, where the role of assistant professor is no longer seen as a step towards associate professor, but as a valuable job in itself. A healthy institute has a good balance between the numbers of full, associate and assistant professors. In the coming year, we will start initiatives to make sure also our assistant professors feel recognized and rewarded.

Try to systematically reduce administrative and unreasonable teaching-burden

We do not agree with the committee that the teaching burden would be unreasonable. Assistant/associate/full professors spend, at most, 60% of their affiliation on teaching duties (only more if they explicitly desire so). Academics who are successful in attracting research funding, can reduce this percentage up to 25%. That also the most successful researchers have to devote part of their affiliation is a conscious decision by the faculty, with support from the department and an overwhelming majority of staff members.

A large administrative burden is often due to being involved in various externally funded projects. In the past years, we have already increased support here, and also advised researchers on their own role: in many projects it is also possible to request funding to hire someone to take over administrative tasks.

Reflection on nationwide comments

On a 'national level' (page 16 of the report), the committee makes the following 10 recommendations:

1. To quantitatively monitor the progress in aligning the programme research focus with the three chosen SSH themes, assess whether sufficient progress has been made, and monitor the influences that facilitate or hamper this alignment.
2. To quantitatively monitor and report the progress of open science activities, including preregistration of research plans, data storage compliance, and data publication and publish these results annually on programme websites.
3. To implement a career-expectation management programme across all eight faculties and regularly evaluate its effectiveness. This programme should encompass providing clarity regarding career opportunities, performance expectations, and the necessity of acknowledging a certain level of uncertainty in career development.
4. To provide researchers who prefer to work in smaller groups or alone the possibility to do so, to make clear that their preference does not damage their career prospects, and to address any concerns and uncertainties in this regard.
5. To be transparent about the principles on which the personnel selection policy is grounded, considering the acknowledged tension in personnel and selection psychology between prioritising specific subgroups and emphasising individual talent.
6. To clarify within institutions the interplay between fundamental and applied research and to allow researchers to engage in fundamental research even when it does not produce directly applicable results.
7. To consider aligning the funding for instrumentation, which includes facilities and specialised personnel, with the standards typically established for the natural sciences.
8. To address the lack of clarity among some PhD candidates regarding dissertation requirements.
9. To implement a monitoring process to oversee the execution of the ongoing transitions in Dutch psychology. It is advisable to conduct monitoring at the programme level and possibly extend it to encompass all psychology research programmes, including those not covered in this assessment.
10. To develop a consistent assessment method in accordance with the SEP requirements to monitor.

Below, we will shortly outline our response to these suggestions.

1. We are currently exploring the technical possibilities to add 'SSH sector plan theme' indicators to Pure. That way, every time a researcher submits a research output to Pure, it will be recorded to which theme(s) this output belongs, enabling us to monitor progress within the themes in real time.
2. In our annual research overview, we will actively monitor the number of preregistrations, published data sets, etc. Data storage compliance is already a requirement.

3. The new personnel policy has just been approved by the faculty. This programme indeed encompasses the requested clarity.
4. We suspect that this recommendation is based on talks with the other institutes. We already have several researchers who prefer to work alone or with (very) small teams, and they are just as well supported by the institute as those who prefer larger groups.
5. See 3: this is part of the new personnel policy
6. Our response here is similar to 4: we have several researchers – and even a whole research unit – dedicated to fundamental research. These researchers receive the same support from the institute and faculty as those who do more applied research.
7. The classical distinction regarding the (cost for) laboratory and instrumentation use between social and natural sciences is fading, and it's important that the funding within the university aligns with this new situation.
8. We have responded to this point elaboratively on page 2.
9. The research directors of the eight participating institutes are currently investigating whether the system set up to showcase the research output of the period 2017-2022 can be transformed into a continuous/annual monitoring system. We are currently in talks with the ICT and RI departments of the Vrije Universiteit to discuss possibilities.
10. See the answer to recommendation 9: this system will serve both recommendation 9 as 10.

We thank the committee once more for their very valuable suggestions.

