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Board of the University

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Our reference
u18.208

Dear members of the University Board,

The Faculty Board and the Board of the Centre for Religious Studies have read with great interest the report of the research review 2012–2017 by the international Peer Review Committee (PRC).

The Faculty Board observes that the PRC has made an in-depth, rigorous and careful investigation of the Faculty's research activities as organised in the Centre for Religious Studies (CRS). The PRC focused on the research quality and strategy of the institution as well as on the relevance to society and the long-term viability of its research programme. In addition, the committee gave special attention to training and supervision of PhD students, to research integrity policy, and to diversity issues. The Faculty Board is most grateful for the PRC's report and the work that went into it.

The Faculty Board is pleased with the PRC's judgement that the Groningen CRS continues to be an international centre of excellence in the study of religion. Having assessed the CRS on the three dimensions of research quality, relevance to society and viability, the PRC concludes that the CRS maintains a very dynamic and well organised research environment.

With regard to the first SEP indicator (research quality), the PRC concludes that the CRS can be rated from very good to excellent.

The PRC assessed the societal engagement, relevance and impact of the CRS as excellent. When compared to other theological and religious studies faculties and departments in Europe, this aspect of the work is particularly impressive according to the PRC.

With regard to viability, the PRC considered the CRS to be a well-run and successful organisation with a clear vision regarding its mission in the critical study of religion. The five centres are, according to the PRC, one of the most impressive aspects of the CRS, especially with regard to organising interdisciplinary research cooperation and societal engagement. The CRS is, according to the PRC, well equipped for the future and its viability is therefore excellent.

The assessments by the PRC are reflected in the following quantitative assessments for the SEP indicators as given in the report:

Research quality:	very good (2)
Relevance to society:	excellent (1)
Viability:	excellent (1)

The Faculty Board compliments all the CRS researchers with these excellent assessments and thanks all of them very much for their hard and good work.

In order to sustain this positive outcome, the PRC emphasizes the need of maintaining the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies as an independent organizational setting for the CRS within the University of Groningen. The PRC is of the opinion that this is an important precondition for giving full chances to the CRS to further develop as an outstanding international research institution, with a strong national impact as well.

In addition to the excellent assessments on the three SEP indicators, the PRC also has formulated a number of recommendations. Here we respond to these recommendations.

Recommendations

4.1. The committee encourages the CRS-1 programme Judaism, Christianity and Islam to continue investing in joint projects, and, more particularly, to further strengthen and integrate Islamic Studies as well as to develop this field of research transversally in connection with the two other CRS programmes.

In accordance with the Self-evaluation Report, CRS-1 aims to continue investing in joint projects, thus also following up on the PRC's recommendation. Furthermore, the Faculty Board is exploring possibilities to create an extra position in the study of Early Islam in the CRS-1 programme, concurring with the PRC's judgement that the combination of Biblical and Islamic Studies is a very strong feature of this programme.

4.2. The committee encourages the CRS-2 programme Comparative Study of Religion to continue to reflect on ways to integrate historical and humanistic as well as social scientific approaches in order to fulfil its objective of studying religion in all of its manifestations.

We concur and the CRS-2 programme will keep reflecting on this and continue to actively engage in interdisciplinary dialogue by using various formats that facilitate the integration of the different approaches.

4.3. The committee advises the CRS-3 programme Christianity and History of Ideas to rethink the description of the research programme with respect to the medieval Christianity, and, if it retains its current medieval subject-matter focus, to consider renaming it. The committee would advise the CRS-3 programme to reflect about integrating also relevant components of the Islamic religion in order to contribute to further developing the transversal research approach to Islamic Studies within the CRS.

We are pleased that the PRC sees an evident coherence in the programme as a whole. Given the fact that only two out of ten staff members of the CRS-3 programme are focused on medieval studies, we see no need to rename or rethink the programme or the sub-programme as such. As regards the integration of the study of Islam in the CRS-3 programme so as to further develop a transversal research approach across the three programmes, the Faculty Board is exploring possibilities to create an extra position in the study of Islam in the CRS-3 programme.

4.4. The committee recommends that CRS makes all researchers involved in its programmes aware of the policy that various ways of doing research – both individual and collaborative – are encouraged and valued.

The Faculty Board is pleased that the PRC appreciates the quality of individual as well as collaborative research undertaken by the CRS and thus concurs with the CRS's encouragement and appreciation of various ways of doing research.

4.5. In order to maintain the high societal impact of the work, the committee recommends the CRS to keep on publishing in Dutch, besides the scholarly publications in international forum languages.

The Faculty Board appreciates this recommendation and the CRS will continue publishing in Dutch, but, at the same time, we emphasize that we also achieve societal impact in English, as is recognized by the PRC in its report.

4.6. *The committee recommends designing an organisational chart of the CRS to make clear the structure of the Centre, and, more especially, the role of the departments in building the strategy of CRS.*

The Faculty Board is pleased to read that the PRC highly estimates the organizational structure of the CRS. The PRC appreciates that the three programmes relate directly to the issue of how strategy is formulated. Although the PRC states that it remains somewhat unclear precisely how the programmes are factored in when determining priorities, the answer is also given by the PRC in the report: the mix of bottom-up and top-down management of the CRS assures stability, according to the PRC. Moreover, the PRC believes in the bottom-up approach that the CRS applies. The process is democratic and effective. The Faculty Board will update the current chart.

4.7. *The committee recommends that the CRS collects data on the career destinations of the PhD graduates.*

The Faculty Board concurs with this recommendation and is happy to say that the Graduate School is already collecting such data. An important follow-up is what to do with the data. We aim to develop an integral approach in which this data is used to benefit the employability of PhD's and to develop further the Career Perspectives Series.

4.8. *The committee recommends taking all appropriate measures to restore the gender balance in the Faculty. According to the self-evaluation report, the measures that the CRS has already taken are a good start. The committee advises CRS to keep gender diversity in mind.*

The Faculty Board appreciates the PRC's support for the measures already taken and is seeking to find ways to improve the gender balance in the Faculty. For example, the Faculty Board is considering hiring at Associate Professor level within the Rosalind Franklin Fellow Programme.

4.9. *The committee recommends that CRS monitors the integration of teaching and research in study programmes at various levels, since training students in research skills is an important factor for generating societal impact through research.*

This is already standing practice at the Faculty. We will continue to monitor the research-driven character of our study programmes at the various levels.

4.10. *The committee recommends that CRS develops and communicates a clear sabbatical policy to relieve time pressure for faculty. Where constraints in this regard may be established at the university-level, the CRS can serve as an advocate for its faculty.*

The Faculty Board appreciates this recommendation and has already entered into conversation with the CRS board to explore the possibilities for how to create a sabbatical policy.

4.11. *The committee recommends that CRS establishes for and publishes to faculty members clearer guidelines how the CRS's publication goals (emphasis on monographs and on fewer, higher-quality journal articles) correlate with university-level Tenure and Promotion guidelines.*

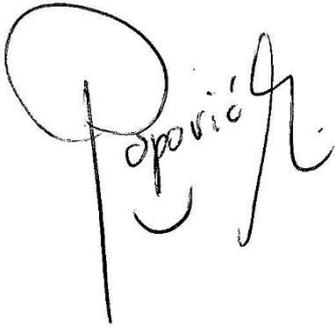
The Faculty Board will take this up in the forthcoming update of the 2015 Tenure Track system.

4.12. *The committee recommends maintaining the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies as an independent faculty within the university.*

The PRC observes that the University of Groningen is the only non-confessional public funded university in the Netherlands with a Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. The Faculty Board is pleased with the PRC's appreciation that we succeed in transcending the perennial tension between theology and religious studies by developing synergy through an integral interdisciplinary approach. Being an independent faculty, the PRC states, positively adds to the quality of the research environment and strengthens

the national and international impact of the CRS that studies theology in a non-confessional way as a branch of intellectual history applying the perspectives of humanities and social sciences. The Faculty Board, therefore, wholeheartedly concurs with this recommendation.

Sincerely,
On behalf of the Faculty Board

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Popović', with a large, stylized initial 'P' on the left.

Prof.dr. Mladen Popović
Dean