

Position of the Board on “RESEARCH REVIEW PSYCHOLOGY 2017”

Approved by CvB 3 April 2018

In 2017, an independent committee conducted a nation-wide evaluation of psychology research in the Netherlands (2011-2016). This included the research program of the Heymans Institute of Psychological Research, part of the Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences (BSS). The evaluation is presented in the Research Review Psychology, QANU 2017.

The Heymans Institute (HI) used to consist of seven research programs, each with its own mission and strategy. These programs were evaluated separately in the previous research review (2005-2010), with assessments ranging from good to very good. About 3 years ago, the HI combined all programs into one main research program, encompassing all nine expertise groups. Simultaneously, the HI reformulated its mission as follows: The HI aims to conduct groundbreaking and impactful research in the main fields of Psychology, with a special focus on collaborative projects. The main strategy became to invest in all nine expertise groups by attracting talented researchers, and to stimulate collaborative research between expertise groups, interdisciplinary research and cooperation with non-academic partners. By doing this, the HI aims to be able to deal flexibly with new research challenges and societally relevant research questions concerning human behavior that need to be studied from a broad perspective and at the same time require specific expertise.

In the current review, the HI received a very good evaluation on all 3 SEP indicators (research quality, societal relevance and viability). To quote some comments in the review:

“The strategy and targets for the upcoming decade are clear, straightforward and supported by the management and staff of the Institute. The committee considers them appropriate and in line with the recently reformulated mission.

The organizational structure is solid and the Institute is well embedded within the Faculty and University. The nine expertise groups cover the broad range of research within Psychology, which makes it possible to flexibly adapt to new research challenges and societal demands. The nine groups can form new alliances and organize collaborations across the expertise groups, depending on the research questions and demands at stake. The committee clearly observed synergy, documented by convincing examples of collaboration.

All nine expertise groups conduct high-quality, original and innovative research, with the expertise groups on Environmental Psychology and on Theory and History of Psychology having unique positions in the landscape of Dutch Psychology. Overall the academic reputation of the researchers is very good, with some of them outstanding. Bibliometric indicators show that impact of the publications is very good, again with some high performers.

The research conducted within HI has very high relevance to society. The dissemination and valorization of results is clearly a part of the strategic efforts. The five narratives listed in the self-evaluation report were very convincing in this respect. The committee observed a clear focus within the Institute towards societal relevance and from the interviews it became clear that this also involves responding to questions from society in the development of research projects.

The committee considers that the Institute is well equipped for the future. In the interviews the committee observed a positive atmosphere in the Institute, which is an excellent basis to start planning the future achievements.”

Given the fact that the HI only recently reformulated its mission, we take this as a clear sign that the institute is on the right track. We agree with the committee, however, that there is room for further refinement of the strategy and that there are some challenges that we need to address in the coming years in order to achieve the institute’s goals. As the report phrases it: if the “HI is to achieve the ambitious goals it sets for the next decade, it should invest a lot of energy in truly moving away from merely maintaining the current status-quo.”

In its conclusions, the committee mentions three points of concern with respect to future viability: *the (i) choice to spread resources over all nine expertise groups, (ii) the dependence on direct funding and (iii) the high teaching load.* We will address each in turn.

A broad research focus

The choice for an inclusive approach to research, ranging over all nine expertise groups, is at the core of the institute's strategy. The committee supports this choice and stimulates the HI to profile itself even more as a broad and inclusive institute, but also points to potential risks. We admit that this choice carries certain risks, but strongly feel that it also allows the institute to address research questions in broad collaborations that would not otherwise be possible. By covering the broad range of research within psychology, the HI can flexibly adapt to new research challenges and societal demands, which is in line with the institute's mission. We will address such collaborations, the other pillar of the institute's strategy below. Here we first address the potential risks.

The committee states that *"by not focusing but rather spreading resources over a large number of psychological disciplines renders it difficult, if not impossible, to excel in all expertise groups."* In a sense, we agree. It is difficult to excel in every area. This, however, is not our aim. What we aim for instead is to ensure, firstly, a solid foundation for psychological research at Groningen; not only because of the connections between research and teaching, but also because the institute needs experts from different research areas to fulfil its mission to study human behavior from the biological to the societal level. In addition to this broad foundation, which of course needs continuous attention, areas that excel will be recognized and rewarded, through our own internal mechanisms for additional funding as well as through external recognition. On a broader level, we can perhaps only achieve excellence by collaborations between talented experts from different groups; i.e., it is necessary to combine expertise to understand truly the complexities of human behavior.

The first challenge for the HI is therefore to find ways to stimulate such collaborations in order to have a research program that studies human behavior from the biological to the societal level. Stimulating bottom up-collaborations will remain a key part of the institute's strategy. In the coming years, the institute intends to supplement this with a more structured approach, e.g., by stimulating collaborative research between expertise groups with small internal collaboration grants, and by matching external grant proposals that are based on collaboration. Together with the funding officer, the HI research director aims to actively bring researchers from different expertise groups together, e.g., by organizing meetings around themes that are relevant to different expertise groups, to stimulate them to combine expertise when applying for grants.

With respect to the stimulation of collaboration on the broader faculty level, the faculty BSS has recently appointed three postdocs to strengthen the newly formulated research domains in BSS (Lifespan Development and Socialization; Deficits, Distress, and Disorders; Sustainability in a Changing Society) in which the expertise groups of psychology also very actively participate. One of the tasks of these postdocs will be to bring researchers together to work on these themes.

For our inclusive research strategy to work, we first need to keep and continue to attract talented researchers in all expertise groups. We should be able to offer talented researchers attractive future prospects, through a tenure track or a comparable system. The temporary appointment of young talented researchers as assistant professor or postdoc who may get tenure when they are successful in getting research funding has also proven to be an effective way of finding and keeping talent in Groningen. Further, we aim to improve the quality of all our researchers. Recently we started to offer workshops to our current research staff, to keep them up to date with respect to advanced research methods. Moreover, we should be able to offer excellent research facilities and support. The faculty BSS is in the process of restructuring and expanding the research support department. The task of the new research support department will be to assist researchers in all stages of their research projects, including support with realizing research ideas and finding funding opportunities, facilitating research data management

compliant with national and discipline specific regulations, and supporting researchers in their knowledge utilization.

Dependence on direct funding

A second concern of the committee is that the research in the HI seems to have relied strongly on direct funding in the period under review. We agree with this point. However, we also note that second and third stream funding has been increasing rapidly over the past two years. That is, as compared to previous years, in 2016 the total amount of funding increased by approximately 25 % (about 2 million Euro), while the amount of direct funding remained stable. Given that we had some significant successes in 2017 (amongst others, a Vici, three VENIs and of course the gravity grant in which the HI also participates) we expect that this trend will continue. Attracting second and third stream funding is also strongly encouraged by the faculty board. In 2015, the faculty hired a funding officer in. The research director and the funding officer jointly identify talent within the HI, and the funding officer actively stimulates and helps researchers to apply for grants.

A related point raised by the committee is that *“the fact that HI is not focusing on a specific research topic might be a hurdle in the grant application strategy, since many research collaborations on different topics dilute manpower to write excellent proposals”*. Here we would like to reiterate the importance of our experts being able to combine their expertise to deal flexibly with new research challenges and societally relevant research questions concerning human behavior. An example of such a collaboration is the study of the consequences of earthquakes in Groningen on people living in this area. Experts from social psychology successfully work together with people from clinical psychology and with societal partners to examine social and health consequences of earthquakes. A second example is the study of human impact on the environment: experts from environmental psychology work together with experts from statistics as well as with many experts from other faculties and societal partners to study these processes. To stimulate such collaborative networks, we actively participate in sustainable society, the Energy and Sustainability Program, and, more recently, in the newly formed Aletta Jacobs School of Public Health. Not only do such organizations stimulate researchers to form new networks, but they also allow researchers to apply for second and third stream grants in the Netherlands and Europe in consortia.

High teaching load

A third concern that the committee has is that *the high teaching load can pose a risk*. We agree that the teaching load is high. We can do little about this. Moreover, as our teaching and research are highly intertwined, we need our research experts in our teaching program.

The graduate program

A fourth, unrelated, concern of the evaluation committee focused on the graduate school. According to the committee, *for a viable future, it is important to keep up the number and quality of PhD candidates*. One comment concerned the 9% of the PhD candidates who are not members of one of the national schools. *The committee thinks that 9% is a rather high percentage, and encourages the Graduate School to ensure that the PhD candidates who are not in a national school receive sufficient content-related and specialized skills training*. Indeed, we agree this is important. The Graduate School is actively stimulating the membership of a national research school among the PhD students. A relatively large part of non-members are PhD-students in developmental psychology. The graduate school is working on this issue, and expects to realize a suitable option for them in the near future.

Further, the committee also thinks *that the duration and completion rates could benefit from a more proactive policy on the part of the Graduate School*. We agree. The quality and progress of PhD projects is currently thoroughly examined at the faculty level, headed by the Graduate School. We expect that policy measures will result from this examination, with positive effects on duration and completion rates.