

Position of the Board regarding Research Evaluation RCS 2018-2023

April 8th 2025, the Board of the University of Groningen has approved the response below, drafted by the Faculty of Religion, Culture & Society.

The Faculty Board and the Board of the Centre for Religious Studies have read with great interest the report of the research evaluation 2018–2023 by the international assessment committee. We are most grateful to the committee for the in-depth, rigorous, and careful report and the work that went into it.

We are pleased with the committee's very positive evaluation of the research quality, societal relevance, and viability of the Faculty of Religion, Culture and Society. It is particularly gratifying that the committee reaffirms RCS as an international centre of excellence in the study of religion, recognizing our faculty as a dynamic and well-organised research environment. The committee emphasizes that the figures and analysis of research output and impact demonstrate that the research strategy of the faculty is effective.

The committee points out, for example, the significant increase and improvement compared to the previous period from 16% to 29% of peer-reviewed journal articles (in addition to monographs and refereed book chapters), the impressive FWCI score close to 4.5, and the high number of visiting researchers with a strong scientific profile that indicate the faculty's attractiveness and reputation. The committee also highlights that 80% of publications are open access, ensuring wider dissemination, a practice which it fully supports. Based on Altmetrics data, the committee determines that this analysis indicates a high level of interest and impact, with links to ministries, policy recommendations, and policy documents underscoring the faculty's influence in shaping public policy and societal discourse. To sustain these positive results, the committee stresses the importance of remaining an independent faculty within the University of Groningen.

The committee highlights the faculty's success in integrating both the social sciences and the humanities, demonstrating a strong interdisciplinary approach in structure and output. The committee also values RCS's collaboration with the sciences and technology and life sciences domains. Furthermore, the committee underscores that the faculty's pursuit of a high degree of interdisciplinarity fits well with the university's overall strategy.

The committee values the faculty's HR policy, especially where the faculty offers its own, complementary policy to that of the university, for example on competence and leadership development. It also praises its academic culture that stimulates the pursuit of high intellectual standards as well as the drive to make an impact within a broad societal context. Regarding PhD policy and training, the committee commends the faculty for fostering a supportive PhD community with interdisciplinary collaboration across departments.

In addition to the very positive assessment, and with the aim to further strengthen the faculty's development as an outstanding international research institution with a strong national and international impact, the committee makes a number of recommendations.

The recommendations concern:

1. make the strategic direction even more explicit to outsiders regarding for example the meaning and role of theology at a public university, and strengthen the strategic direction by complementing the current bottom-up approach with a top-down element and introducing cross-faculty research themes that transcend departments and centres, thus anchoring interdisciplinarity even more strongly within the faculty and embedding the successful initiatives on societal engagement in an even stronger and more cohesive strategy;
2. further expansion of focus on the Global South;
3. simplify the organizational structure by steering towards societally relevant research themes with more top-down coordination that further strengthens interdisciplinarity;
4. further improve networking and career opportunities for the small number of post- docs

- at the faculty through a postdoctoral network, potentially across faculties;
5. ensure equal opportunities for all different types of PhDs that the faculty has.

We have already begun to act on these recommendations, and respond as follows:

Regarding the recommendations to complement the current bottom-up with a more top-down approach, by identifying overarching research themes and thus also to integrate our impact efforts even more into a formal strategic structure, as well as to anchor interdisciplinarity even more strongly, in the fall of 2024 we have identified three key themes that capture the position of the faculty as a strong, collaborative SSH unit with unique knowledge and expertise. This trinity is:

1. AI in theology
2. Values-driven society
3. Health

These three themes interact with emerging, university-wide foci in all three domains. Together, they form the faculty's distinct SSH profile and evidence the interdisciplinary nature and integration of the academic study of religion in the university. The theme "values-driven society" anchors RCS within the broader SSH domain as showcased by for example the faculty's religion and heritage research, while the themes "AI in theology" and "Health" also connect with the other two domains of sciences and technology and the life sciences, showcasing RCS's collaborations with these domains by for example its AI-based research on the Dead Sea Scrolls and its research on death and the end of life.

These three themes are not isolated silos but communicating vessels, which means that the themes are interconnected within the faculty as well as with other faculties, also across domains, thereby strengthening inter- and transdisciplinarity through organizational and strategic anchoring, such as through the University of the North and Nij Begun. This trinity will determine current and future strategic decisions regarding financial support to buttress the faculty's mission, which remains the study of religion as a cultural phenomenon and social force past and present.

In response to the committee's question to make more explicit what is meant by 'theology' and a 'non-confessional' approach to religion, we emphasize that theology and the study of religion at a public university are inherently public and not tied to a specific denominational identity. It is somewhat comparable to how Spiritual Care is organized in the Netherlands, with a professional association that recognizes professionals who work from within and are endorsed by an officially recognized religious or spiritual institution (institutionally affiliated)

as well as professionals who have a non-institutional mandate (institutionally non-affiliated). Similarly, theology in Groningen is institutionally non-affiliated and independent of specific religious or denominative traditions such as Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims or organised worldview traditions such as secular Humanists. By studying religion and theology in this way at a public university—institutionally non-affiliated, independent and impartial—we can ideally serve the public good: analysing and informing about the role of religion in the world past and present, without favour or prejudice. Religion is simply too important to be left to believers alone. This unique positioning in the Dutch academic landscape is well understood and highly valued by partners such as the PThU, a denominational university.

We agree with the committee that a further expansion of our focus on the Global South can enhance the faculty's global relevance and collaboration with related departments, which is something we are already doing in several of our programmes. We align ourselves here with the university's efforts for strategic partnerships. Where expansion is possible it will be determined by the trinity of overarching themes.

Regarding improving networking and career opportunities for the small number of post-docs at the faculty through a postdoctoral network, potentially across faculties, we refer to the university's Young Academy Groningen which organizes all sorts of events and opportunities for early career researchers to engage, such as early career lunches, pub lectures, etc. We will bring this more actively under the attention of the post-docs at our faculty.

With regard to ensuring equal opportunities for different types of PhD researchers in the faculty, the Graduate School has already taken steps to align the trajectories of the different types of doctoral projects. This means that external PhD researchers with their own funding are treated in the same way as internal researchers with employment status. This relates to the scheduling of regular R&D interviews, participation in Graduate School seminars, and other aspects of their PhD studies. There are some legal differences (e.g., eligibility for the Faculty Council) between the groups that we cannot ignore, but we support efforts to achieve further alignment.

It is my pleasure to once again thank the committee for its in-depth, rigorous, and careful assessment and very positive evaluation, and for its very helpful recommendations. Again, we are especially pleased that the committee reaffirms the faculty's status as a leading international centre for the study of religion, acknowledging RCS as a vibrant and well-organised research environment.

Sincerely,

On behalf of the Faculty Board and the Board of the Centre for Religious Studies,

Prof.dr. Mladen Popović
Dean