



Support and criticism go hand in hand

Interpretation Recognition & Rewards Culture Barometer

Introduction

Since 2020, Dutch universities, university medical centres, research institutes and research funders have been working together in the Recognition & Rewards programme. The aim of this initiative is to bring about a cultural change that creates more room for academics with different talents and strengths. The first Recognition & Rewards Culture Barometer survey was conducted among researchers at participating institutions in January 2024. Two years later, in January 2026, the second survey was carried out. The Culture Barometer helps us understand whether the programme's ambitions and the related behaviours are recognised, experienced and shared in the workplace. It also provides insight into the extent to which the intended cultural change is progressing.

The results of the second survey are both encouraging and confronting. They are encouraging because academics broadly support the ambitions of the Recognition & Rewards programme. They are confronting because, over the past two years, academics have seen too little evidence of the policies developed by their institutions. With the national programme coming to an end in late 2026, these findings require an honest interpretation. To that end, an interpretation committee was established and asked to respond to the results. This article first discusses the key findings of the second survey. It then interprets these findings and presents recommendations for both the short and longer term.

If you are interested in reading the full sector report by Berenschot, including the results of the Recognition & Rewards Culture Barometer and several additional analyses, please [click here](#).

What are the main findings?

The Culture Barometer reveals a clear tension. On the one hand, there is broad support for the programme's ambitions. Academics almost unanimously endorse the five ambitions of Recognition & Rewards; only 2–3% indicate that they do not identify with them. In addition, a majority of academics feel personally recognised and appreciated for their work. At the same time, many feel that these ambitions have not yet translated into everyday practice. While more than 40% of respondents see positive changes at policy level, most report little or no change at the level of systems, culture and day-to-day work.

The open responses show that academics are critical about the programme's progress. One academic wrote: 'The programme is still not alive at all in our workplace.' Another commented: 'There is a lot of talk about recognition and rewards, but unfortunately far too little action.' A third respondent wrote: 'Recognition and rewards is largely a form of favouritism.' These comments are not isolated. They reflect a widely shared experience. Many researchers see



Recognition & Rewards as a largely paper-based reality. Traditional assessment mechanisms are still perceived as dominant, promotion criteria are often unclear, and dependence on managers appears to have increased. Another recurring concern is that broader recognition of different domains is experienced mainly as an increase in workload.

A closer look at the five ambitions

The following picture emerges for the five ambitions outlined in the position paper [Room for everyone's talent](#).

- *Diversify and vitalise career paths*: forty percent of respondents say they can choose a differentiated career path within their institution. Slightly more than half have actually done so. In practice, however, academics still tend to choose the traditional profile – a combination of teaching and research – in which research performance is seen as the key factor for promotion. Although institutions have developed other career paths, there is a widespread perception that these offer less recognition and fewer opportunities for advancement.
- *Achieving a balance between individual and collective performance*: a modest positive improvement can be seen in this area. In 2026, 59% of academics feel that their contribution to the team is recognised, compared with 53% in 2024. At the same time, only one-third of academics believe that collective achievements carry more weight than individual achievements.
- *Focus on quality*: almost half of respondents say they consider quality more important than quantity. In practice, however, academics are still primarily assessed on their research performance, often using quantitative indicators such as publication counts and journal impact factors. Teaching, impact, leadership, teamwork and Open Science carry considerably less weight. Academics would like to see this change, although they also emphasise that assessment criteria should be tailored to an individual's profile, talents and career stage.
- *Encouraging Open Science*: many academics are encouraged to work according to the principles of Open Science. For example, 75% of researchers publish through Open Access, and 60% of research data is made available for reuse. However, academics receive far less encouragement when it comes to Open Education (the sharing of educational materials). This encouragement is often driven by external requirements, while sustained internal support in terms of time, funding and recognition is frequently lacking.
- *Promoting leadership in academia*: around 40% of respondents believe that sufficient attention is given to leadership development. In addition, more than half of academics believe that personal leadership is encouraged and that formal leaders pay attention to collaboration within their teams. At the same time, half of respondents say they do not have enough time for their leadership responsibilities.

Expectations and experiences

Where expectations of the programme were largely positive in 2024, experiences in 2026 present a more mixed picture. In 2024, nearly half of respondents expected Recognition & Rewards to increase their job satisfaction. By 2026, however, only 15% report actually experiencing this, while 70% of academics notice no difference. While 44% expected Recognition & Rewards to reduce work-related frustration, a quarter of academics now report experiencing more frustration instead. Many academics feel that they are expected to excel in all core domains – in other words, to be a jack of all trades. As a result, Recognition & Rewards has unintentionally added to an already high workload. Of course, external factors also play a role, such as the competitive research funding system, budget cuts in higher education and research, and uncertainty about permanent positions. These factors are real and significant, but they fall outside the scope of Recognition & Rewards.



Respondents support the ambitions of Recognition & Rewards, but point to a gap between policy and practice. A significant proportion of respondents are concerned about the feasibility of the Recognition & Rewards programme. There are concerns that the programme will not succeed in achieving its intended ambitions, or that it may lead to a decline in quality, particularly in research. In addition, 40% of respondents feel that the programme is actually contributing to the creation of the proverbial jack of all trades. These concerns are particularly common among academics aged 30 to 50, many of whom hold positions as assistant professor or associate professors.

How should we interpret these results?

The results show that the programme's ambitions enjoy broad support. That is an important and positive signal. Academics genuinely hope to see a change in the culture of academia. At the same time, the fact that academics are more concerned than they were in 2024 – both about the implementation of the programme and about what it may mean for their own careers – is a signal we cannot afford to ignore. The partners in the programme share responsibility for addressing this, both collectively and individually.

Paper versus reality

The Culture Barometer reveals a gap between policy and day-to-day practice. It is important to acknowledge, however, that this discrepancy is a common feature of cultural change. The literature on cultural change often distinguishes a number of phases. The national [programme plan](#) identifies six successive phases (see *Figure 1*). A complex cultural change process such

In focus: the six phases of change

Change begins with the collective development of a vision and a corresponding approach to change (Phase 1). Almost simultaneously, institutions enter a phase focused on expanding the capacity for imagining change within their own organisations (Phase 2). As a result, a national structure has been established to facilitate the exchange of good practices. In the next phase, institutions and other units begin translating the vision into their own context (Phase 3). This, in turn, leads to the development of new policies, processes, and criteria or tools (Phase 4). The next step is to implement these new processes and systems (Phase 5), followed by ongoing efforts to ensure that the changes are sustained over time (Phase 6). Behaviour is a crucial factor throughout this process.

1

Researching and formulating a vision

Committees translate position paper to own context and organize dialogue

2

Increasing power of imagination and experimenting

Investigating and increasing confidence in new opportunities

3

Adding meaning

Active steps towards implementing vision within own organisation

4

Specifying and developing

Development of supporting products and criteria

5

Implementing

New systems become embedded in daily actions, thoughts & considerations

6

Consolidating

Ensure that new behaviour becomes ingrained



as Recognition & Rewards is a long-term endeavour that cannot be achieved within just a few years.

Over the past five years, there has been a fundamental shift in how career development, promotion, quality, and leadership are viewed. This shift in thinking has indeed been translated into new policies, processes, and tools within institutions. There are many good examples of this in practice.¹ Recognition & Rewards has therefore reached a turning point: the policies and tools are in place, but they have not yet become sufficiently embedded in the behaviour and leadership practices of either academics or their managers. As long as words, behaviour, and decisions are not aligned, a culture change will not succeed. In the current phase, we therefore emphasise the importance of honesty, transparency, and consistency. Only then can Recognition & Rewards succeed.

Target groups

Our analysis of the responses indicates that the following groups require particular attention:

1. *Early-career academics*: nearly half of all PhD candidates are unfamiliar with Recognition & Rewards, despite being generally supportive of the programme's ambitions. At the same time, early-career academics experience considerable uncertainty about assessment and career prospects. While Recognition & Rewards emphasises the diversity of academic work, the doctoral programme still tends to focus predominantly on research. We therefore recommend that the sector engage in a broader discussion about the content and structure of the doctoral programme, so that it better reflects the realities of contemporary academic careers.
2. *Mid-career academics*: this group – often comprising assistant and associate professors – experiences the tension between policy and practice particularly strongly. They welcome the development of different career pathways but also report uncertainty about the assessment criteria being applied and feel that their dependence on line managers has increased as a result. Many also have the impression that they are expected to excel across multiple domains. In our view, this group would benefit from greater transparency about ongoing processes, clearer assessment criteria, and more consistent implementation of policy.
3. *International staff*: international staff generally support the objectives of the programme, while at the same time expressing concerns about how it aligns with the international academic labour market. In our view, this highlights the need to communicate more clearly that Recognition & Rewards is part of a broader international movement.
4. *Policymakers and institutional leaders*: the Culture Barometer reveals a gap between policy and day-to-day practice. Bridging this gap requires attention to several factors. First, there needs to be greater alignment on our direction, both within institutions and across the sector as a whole. Clear objectives and shared agreements help provide direction. Strong leadership commitment and collaboration across faculties are essential preconditions. Second, cultural change requires ownership at *all levels* of the *entire* organisation. Open dialogue and the space to experiment are indispensable in this regard. Finally, connective leadership is needed. Changes in behaviour and culture are strongly supported by leaders who set the example through their own actions.

Recommendations

Based on the above, the interpretation committee makes a number of concrete recommendations. In doing so, we distinguish between the short and the long term.

¹ See the annual reports and the various editions of the e-magazine.



Short term – through the end of 2026

1. *Ensure consistent communication.* Broad support for Recognition & Rewards is no longer the issue; communicating its message consistently is. As long as news articles and other communications continue to focus primarily on individual grants, awards, and personal achievements, the principles underpinning Recognition & Rewards are publicly undermined. Communications departments should therefore receive clear guidance to ensure that institutions present a consistent narrative.
2. *Make criteria accessible and consistent.* A substantial proportion of academics (30–40%) do not know which criteria are used for recruitment, development, appointment, and promotion. This is not a matter of unwillingness; in many cases, the criteria are difficult to find, and significant differences exist between faculties. It is not desirable to create new checklists; rather, information about policies and assessment criteria should be easy to find. Ideally, this should be a two-way process: managers should actively draw employees' attention to the relevant criteria and procedures, while employees should feel encouraged to discuss and question these with their managers. In addition, greater consistency and alignment are needed across faculties and institutes.
3. *Make leadership a genuine responsibility.* Half of all academics indicate that managers are not given sufficient time to carry out their leadership responsibilities. Yet leadership is a skill that requires dedicated time and attention. As long as leadership is treated as an additional duty alongside teaching and research, associated merely with a particular position level, leadership development risks becoming little more than window dressing. The first step is to make leadership time explicit within managers' appointments – not only for newly appointed managers but also for those already in leadership roles. Existing leadership development and onboarding programmes should be strengthened accordingly: less focused on acquiring skills on the side, and more focused on preparing people for a role in which leadership is formally recognised as part of the position.
4. *Design doctoral programmes in line with the principles of Recognition & Rewards.* Assess the development of independent researchers on the basis of a broader range of activities and create room for diverse forms of academic output. Academic work is about more than publishing articles.

Long term – from 2027 onwards

1. *Reassess the weighting of the different domains.* Research is still widely regarded as the most important domain. Teaching, impact, Open Science, and Open Education carry considerably less weight. Academics indicate that this should change and want these aspects to be given meaningful consideration in assessment and evaluation processes.
2. *Work towards greater harmonisation across institutions and disciplines.* The Culture Barometer reveals substantial differences between institutions and academic disciplines in how Recognition & Rewards is experienced. Some differences are understandable and even desirable; others are not, such as uncertainty about assessment criteria and the extent to which Recognition & Rewards is perceived as mere framing. Progress can be made through regular exchange of practices and targeted alignment across institutions.
3. *Promote mobility.* One-third of academics fear that their chosen profile may hinder a move to another institution, either within or beyond the Netherlands. Institutions should engage in dialogue about what is needed to support academics with international ambitions. Greater attention should also be paid to staff considering a move from academia to other sectors, and vice versa.
4. *Shift the focus from 'jack of all trades' to 'team of all trades'.* More than 40% of academics feel that they are expected to excel across all domains. This is precisely the



opposite of what Recognition & Rewards aims to achieve. The solution lies not with the individual but with the team, in which each member fulfils a distinct role and the collective brings together the full range of strengths and expertise – the team, rather than the individual, becomes the jack of all trades. This calls, for example, for the application of strategic workforce planning at institutional, faculty, and departmental levels.

5. *Embed the principles in existing policies and practices.* The intended culture change will only be successful when the principles of Recognition & Rewards are no longer seen as a separate programme but are experienced as the normal way of working within Dutch academia. This requires not only changes in policy but also a sustained translation into everyday practice. Continued dialogue between policy advisers, institutional leaders, and academics is essential to achieving this.

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