

University of Groningen

Research Assessment Protocol

adapted in line with the Standard Evaluation Protocol 2015-2021

Introduction & Contents

This protocol sets out the procedure and instructions for the quality assurance of research at the University of Groningen,¹ in accordance with and supplementing the national guidelines laid down in the *Standard Evaluation Protocol 2015-2021* (SEP²), effective from 1 January 2015. It serves as a manual for the planning, organization and follow-up of external SEP assessments once every six years and of interim internal midterm reviews.

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Validity of this protocol

This protocol will remain valid for at least the same period as the SEP 2015-2021, with the exception of necessary adaptation due to potential intervening adjustments to the SEP and changes in the Groningen research organization or time schedule that will be incorporated in Appendix 1 (see app.5).

¹ Where the University of Groningen is mentioned, the University Medical Center Groningen (UMCG) is also meant. Despite the 2007 transfer in legal position of personnel from the former Faculty of Medical Sciences to the UMCG, final responsibility for academic research and teaching has remained with the Board of the University of Groningen.

² Downloadable from [this VSNU website](#).

Chapter I. Main goals and principles

1.1 External assessment according to the SEP

All Dutch universities are bound to the SEP, a common protocol for the quality assessment of their research. The main goals are to inform the Board of the University about the quality, relevance and viability of the research performed at the University of Groningen (internal accountability), to improve it where needed (benchmarking) and to inform both public and private sponsors, including the government, other stakeholders and society at large (external accountability).

External evaluations are organized once every six years and based on informed peer review by independent international experts that assess research units with a clearly defined shared strategy on three main criteria:

- Quality
- Societal relevance³
- Viability

The final qualitative judgement of the Peer Review Committee (PRC) on each criterion is supplemented with a quantitative score on a discrete scale with four categories (4: unsatisfactory, 3: good, 2: very good, 1: world leading / excellent).

In addition, the PRC provides a qualitative evaluation of each unit's:

- contribution to the supervision and instruction of PhD candidates
- policy on research integrity

The Peer Review Committee (PRC) follows the instructions laid down in the SEP and further detailed in the Terms of Reference formulated by the Board of the University. It bases its judgement on written documentation provided by the research unit (including a self-evaluation report) and on interviews with representatives of the unit and relevant bodies during a site visit.

The findings of the PRC are published in a report that will be made public on the University's website, together with a position document describing the Board of the University's (hereinafter Board) main conclusions and measures in response to the PRC's recommendations and the unit's comments. Sensitive information that might harm the privacy of individuals or non-disclosure agreements with external stakeholders can be provided in a confidential management letter, either at the PRC's own initiative or at the request of the Board.

1.2 Midterm reviews

The University of Groningen will also carry out internal self-evaluations of all its research in between two external assessments. These midterm reviews have proven valuable since their introduction in 2003 with a previous version of the SEP. As outlined in Chapter III, they are mainly aimed at preparing for the next external assessment and generally will not involve site visits or appointment of external PRCs.

1.3 Time schedule and national coordination

The Board decides which research units are to be assessed when and by whom. The University of Groningen favours joint assessments with comparable units from other universities,⁴ if possible. The guiding principle is 'full evaluation of the institute in its entirety'. This means that national, disciplinary assessments are preferred only if the entire institute can be assessed, covering its full mission and all subunits. A Faculty Board must propose to the Board its preferred choice (local

³ Largely corresponding with 'impact' as defined in the British REF: 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia'.

⁴ Including foreign universities and the KNAW and NWO institutes.

evaluation or joint evaluation with external participants) and substantiate that choice, including an explanation of how the research will be benchmarked.

An overview of the current planning is presented in Appendix 1. This schedule is discussed at the biannual meetings between the Board and Faculty Boards⁵ and can be updated if necessary.

Whether external evaluations are organized locally or nationally/jointly must be decided well in advance, since this partly depends on the outcome of national consultation of relevant disciplinary bodies. This is stipulated in the Action Plan (see Section II.4).

1.4 Units of Assessment and level of aggregation

Research at the University of Groningen is organized in 28 institutes⁶, further referred to as SEP institutes (see Appendix 1), representing its main Units of Assessment. Most SEP institutes have subdivided their research into programmes. The SEP defines a unit of assessment as having ‘its own clearly defined strategy and be sufficiently large in size, i.e. at least ten research FTEs among its permanent academic staff, including staff with tenure-track positions and not including PhD candidates and postdocs’. This roughly corresponds to units with at least 25 (head count) senior staff members. Many Groningen programmes and some SEP institutes are smaller than this suggested minimum. Until further notice, the University of Groningen will maintain its existing research organization, including the distinction between SEP institutes and programmes, irrespective of their current size, but Units of Assessment are expected to strive for sufficient critical mass to remain nationally and internationally visible, and PRCs will be instructed to explicitly address the viability of smaller units. In addition the following guidelines apply:

1. Both external and midterm assessments are performed at the level of the institute. Evaluation at programme⁷ level is possible but not obligatory (also in view of the SEP recommendation for sufficient mass). The Faculty Board will propose to the Board its preferred level of aggregation and will sufficiently substantiate its choice.
2. Evaluation at programme level, if chosen, must meet the following requirements:
 - For programmes significantly smaller than 10 research FTE of senior staff, the PRC will be instructed to pay special attention to the viability of the programme. If necessary, the PRC can be asked to provide its judgment in a confidential management letter.⁸
 - The (internal) midterm review preceding and/or following the external evaluation must also be performed at programme level. In addition to its main function, i.e. to prepare for the next external assessment, it can provide a Faculty Board with more detailed information at the level of smaller but still significant research units.
 - The information to be provided in the self-evaluation report on the institute’s programmes is limited to only those components of the SEP format that provide complementary information (i.e. without duplication of information provided at the institute level).

National or joint external evaluations *in addition* call for:

- Consensus between the participating universities, as apparent from the Discipline Protocol / Terms of Reference. This includes an agreement on the preferred size of the Units of Assessment.

1.5 Division of costs, tasks and responsibilities

The three main parties involved in an external assessment, distinguished in the SEP, are the Board, the Units of Assessment and the PRC. A clear overview of their respective tasks and responsibilities is presented in SEP Appendix A. However, although final responsibility for the University’s quality assurance rests with the Board, the execution of many tasks is delegated to the Faculty Boards. In

⁵ Where a Faculty Board is mentioned, UMCG’s Board of Governors and KVI-CART’s Director are also meant.

⁶ Situation in January 2015, referring to the Groningen main units of assessment. Research collaboration takes place in many more forms and networks, often labelled as ‘Institute’ as well, but these are not evaluated as such under the SEP.

⁷ Assessment at programme level means that the PRC is asked to provide a judgment not only of the entire institute, but also of all its programmes.

⁸ Which will not be included in the public PRC report, see Section I.1.

addition, the supervision and training of PhD candidates is organized in nine⁹ (local) Graduate Schools, one for each Faculty, each with its own Director and all coordinated by a Dean of Graduate Schools. Since the supervision and training of PhD candidates is a separate focus of assessment in SEP 2015-2021, the role of the Graduate Schools also has to be incorporated in the assessments.

Chapter II provides a detailed internal delineation of timelines, tasks and responsibilities. The most relevant Groningen principles, agreements and definitions are described first below.

Costs

All costs of both external assessments and midterm reviews will be covered by the Faculty. The Faculty Board is responsible for drawing up and monitoring the budget. In the event of national or joint assessments, the Faculty Board will ensure that the costs are reasonably shared between the participating Universities. The cost estimate is part of the Action Plan (see Section II.4) to be approved by the Board.

SEP institutes and programmes

An SEP institute is a group of researchers with an articulated shared mission, performing research within one or more programmes under the same management (director and/or scientific board, further referred to as ‘the Director’). The Director is appointed by and accountable to the Faculty Board.¹⁰ If researchers from more than one Faculty participate in an SEP institute,¹¹ one Faculty Board will act as corresponding author and ensure that proper arrangements are made with the other Faculty Boards regarding the participation of their researchers in the institute. The Director of the institute is responsible for monitoring the mission, strategy and research quality and impact within the institute, and, where applicable,¹² proper supervision of PhD candidates, academic integrity, scouting for and hiring new talent, acquisition of external research funding, provision of tailored research facilities and the distribution of research capacity and facilities over the institute’s programmes.

A programme is headed by one or more programme leaders who monitor a specified theme or sub-theme, approach or expertise regarding research within the institute’s broader mission.

Local and interuniversity Graduate Schools

The SEP requires the supervision and instruction of PhD candidates to be explicitly addressed in external assessments. The information to be provided in the self-evaluation report is given in SEP Appendix D. However, the Groningen SEP institutes often do not overlap with local or interuniversity Graduate Schools.¹³ At the University of Groningen, both Research Master and PhD programmes are organized in nine Faculty-based Graduate Schools under the responsibility of a Graduate School Director. These ‘local’ Graduate Schools are part of the Groningen Graduate School coordinated by the Dean of Graduate Schools.

As well as the nine Groningen Graduate Schools, additional training and facilities can be provided by national, interuniversity Graduate Schools.¹⁴ Until 2015, these were called Research Schools and could be accredited by a special committee (ECOS) of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts & Sciences

⁹ With the start of University College Friesland, a possible tenth Graduate School may emerge. The relationship between this tenth Graduate School, the nine current Schools and the Dean of Graduate Schools has yet to be defined.

¹⁰ The appointment must be approved by the Board.

¹¹ At present, the only SEP institute with participants from more than one Faculty is GUIDE (UMCG with FWN/GRIP participation).

¹² The tasks allotted to research institutes may vary between faculties. A clear description of how tasks are assigned within a faculty must be given in the self-evaluation report.

¹³ The term Graduate School is used here to describe both the former ECOS-accredited Research Schools (referred to as interuniversity Graduate Schools here) and the faculty Graduate Schools operative at the University of Groningen.

¹⁴ Only interuniversity Graduate Schools can be accredited according to the ‘Handreiking kwaliteitsbeoordeling onderzoekscholen’ (see footnote 15). A protocol similar to the former ECOS accreditation will be followed for both this accreditation and the assessment/accreditation of the faculty Graduate Schools.

(KNAW). This required separate procedures that have been partly incorporated in the SEP, and partly in additional guidelines published separately afterwards.¹⁵

Appendix 2 and Format 3 provide guidelines for the assessment of both local and interuniversity Graduate Schools. The latter can acquire or maintain their national accreditation this way. Appendix 2 also explains the role of the local, Faculty-based Graduate School in providing the information needed for the evaluation of the PhD training and supervision, as part of the assessment of the SEP institute.

1.6 Terms of Reference, Discipline Protocol, Action Plan

SEP Appendix B provides a detailed format for the written instructions for the PRC, the Terms of Reference (ToR), to be completed by the Board in consultation with the relevant Faculty Board. In national or joint assessments, the ToR is usually referred to as the Discipline Protocol and requires additional prior agreements between the participating Universities. These are prepared by a national Disciplinary Body to be appointed by the relevant Faculty Deans. The agreements are laid down in an Action Plan and include nomination of a lead University (and coordinating Faculty). The Action Plan must be approved by the Boards of all participating universities and must meet the requirements described in Chapter II.

Local assessments also require an Action Plan, to be drafted by the Faculty Board and approved by the Board of the University (see Section II.4).

1.7 Self-evaluation report plus additional documentation

SEP Section 5 and SEP Appendix D provide detailed instructions and formats for the information to be provided to the PRC 1-2 months prior to the site visit. However, these are still somewhat ambiguous, in particular regarding the status of SEP Table D3b (main categories of research output), its relationship to Table D1, and the relationship of the latter to the University's 'set of Valorization indicators', drawn up in November 2013 as part of a national exercise. These topics are clarified in Appendix 4 and Formats 1 + 2 below.

1.8 Registration of research input and output

Faculty Boards are primarily responsible for the registration of research output and activities in PURE, the University's current research information system (CRIS), introduced in 2014/2015. As of 2016, when the system should have been fully operational for long enough, only that output recorded in and generated by PURE will be admissible for inclusion in the documentation needed for an assessment or midterm review. The same will apply to research input, but only after PURE has been sufficiently adapted to allow its registration. This is expected to be the case as of 2016. Meanwhile, data will have to be derived from the previous CRIS or the Faculty's own system.

The University's PDCA cycle¹⁶ comprises annual reporting of research input and output data following a format that is more detailed but compatible with the SEP format. It is incorporated in the format for midterm reviews (appended to Format 3) and will enhance continuity and professionalization, thereby reducing the administrative burden.

1.9 Deviation from the SEP

The current SEP is less detailed than previous versions and leaves more room for flexibility and tailored assessments. It explicitly states that deviation is allowed, provided the Board 'has good reasons for its decision'.

If further deviations are foreseen during initial preparation of an assessment, the research unit must report this in good time to its Faculty Board, which will seek the approval of the Board. Such deviations must be included in the ToR and/or Action Plan.

¹⁵ This refers to the 'Handreiking kwaliteitsbeoordeling onderzoekscholen' ('Guidelines for quality assessment for graduate schools', in Dutch), agreed upon in December 2014 by all parties involved (VSNU and SODOLA).

¹⁶ The Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle is an iterative four-step model for implementing change, also widely used for quality assurance.

Chapter II. External assessments

This chapter describes the way the SEP guidelines for external assessments are implemented at the University of Groningen. It follows the same structure and numbering as the SEP, reflecting the chronological sequence of the required steps.

II.1 Key features of the SEP

See Section I.2.

II.2 Assessment criteria

Although Productivity has been abolished as a separate assessment criterion, it is still evaluated as part of Quality. Therefore, SEP Tables D3a (research input) and D3b (research output) remain obligatory parts of the self-evaluation report, alongside SEP Table D1. An important consideration here is that these tables correspond to the VSNU definitions and format for annual reports of research information, yielding the KUOZ database that provides an important source for benchmarking university units.

Societal relevance requires more explicit underpinning than previously. This is ensured by SEP Table D1 and SEP Format D2 for the accompanying ‘narratives’. See also Section II.5 below.

II.3 Research units

See Section I.4 and Appendix 1. In addition, the SEP demands that all research be assessed once every six years (i.e. 100% coverage). Some research within a Faculty may not be part of a SEP institute or programme, as may be the case for parts of old programmes recently terminated. The research input and output must be reported but may be kept out of the SEP tables for the SEP institutes and programmes. This must be clearly explained in the self-evaluation report.

II.4 Scheduling and managing an external assessment

See Sections I.3-5 and Appendix 1. In addition, the guidelines below apply.

National coordination 3-4 years in advance

Given the fact that the preceding midterm review is supposed to take place at the same level of aggregation as the external assessment (see Section I.4), it is highly desirable that the choice of either local or national / joint evaluation is known 3-4 years prior to the external assessment. The Deans of the Groningen Faculties are therefore urged to strive for timely discussion of the SEP agenda in the appropriate national Disciplinary Bodies.

Kick-off

In December of the year preceding a planned assessment at the latest, the Board will send a letter instructing the Faculty Board to start preparations. It will ask the Faculty to appoint an administrative coordinator in charge of the logistical and other practical arrangements to be made, and to submit an Action Plan to be approved by the Board at least 6 months before the planned site visit.

Action Plan

The Action Plan must address the following topics:

1. an overview of the Faculty's units to be assessed and their estimated size
2. whether or not other universities will join the assessment
3. the period to be assessed
4. a draft timetable / schedule
5. the profile / required expertise of the PRC
6. nomination of the PRC's chair and members, including brief CVs
7. nomination of a secretary for the PRC
8. a draft programme for the site visit
9. additional information to be provided to the PRC, alongside the self-evaluation and other documentation prescribed by the SEP (e.g. a bibliometric analysis, stakeholder survey)

10. additional instructions and/or questions for the PRC, to be incorporated in the ToR (see below); including a request for a confidential management letter if smaller programmes are to be assessed
11. a cost estimate
12. additionally, only for national / joint assessment:
 - a. the other universities that will participate, including an overview of their units of assessment plus estimated size
 - b. the lead university (and coordinating Faculty)
 - c. the national body in charge of the preparations
13. additionally, only for local assessment:
 - a. a motivation of why no national or joint assessment will be organized
 - d. how to meet the need for a benchmark with comparable research groups outside Groningen

With a national / joint assessment, the Department of Research & Valorisation (R&V) must be informed sufficiently and in good time during the preparation phase. If Groningen is the lead university, R&V will be responsible for the coordination and communication between the Boards of the universities and their central staff.

Terms of Reference (ToR) / Discipline Protocol

See Section I.6 and the description of the Action Plan above. In addition, good note should be taken of the additional instructions to be provided by the Board in consultation with the Faculty Boards, as required by SEP Appendix B:

- specification of the research units to be assessed
- specific aspects that the PRC should focus on, related to either strategic issues or a unit's specific tasks; if programmes with < 10 research FTE of senior staff are to be assessed, the PRC will be asked to explicitly reflect on the consequences of the unit's size for its viability and national/international visibility and, if appropriate, to publish its judgement on these units in a separate, confidential management letter.

For national assessments, the SEP format allows one additional question: 'to make strategic recommendations for the entire discipline at national level'. This may seem to leave little room for questions tailored to different units. However, when needed, additional instructions and questions can be incorporated in the Action Plan. In fact, a Discipline Protocol may be defined as the combination of several ToRs (one for each university) plus the Action Plan.

Composition of the Peer Review Committee (PRC)

With local assessment the PRC is appointed by the Board, which bears final responsibility for its composition, competence and impartiality, as described in SEP Section 4.3. It makes sure all PRC members and the secretary receive, sign and return the 'Statement of impartiality and confidentiality' provided by SEP Appendix C. However, the Faculty Board is expected to find candidates and to substantiate the nominations of the PRC members in terms of academic excellence, areas of expertise and independence (see also the Action Plan above). In addition, the following directions apply:

- In the event of doubt, the Board may consult external peers for advice on the expertise and independence of candidates.
- PRC candidates may have to be contacted by the Faculty before their eligibility has been confirmed by the Board, e.g. to check their availability. If so, they should be explicitly informed that their nomination is pending, subject to formal approval by the Board. The same applies to the secretary.
- An independent secretary of the PRC, not associated with the own university, must be appointed.¹⁷

¹⁷ Therefore, the Department of R&V cannot provide the secretary any more.

- The Board formally confirms the appointment of the PRC members through a letter, accompanied by the ToR, the SEP, this protocol (GRAP) and the ‘Statement of impartiality and confidentiality’.

With national / joint assessment, the lead university will appoint the PRC members, in consultation with the other participating universities.

Given the expertise required to assess Societal Relevance, PhD Programmes and Research Integrity, the University of Groningen requires PRCs, in addition to the conditions stated in SEP Section 4.3, to include at least one:

- external member, i.e. not associated with a university and sufficiently acquainted with a relevant stakeholder group (other than the general public)
- member who is sufficiently acquainted with the Dutch context (funding, PhD system, Ethical code, etc.); this member may have Dutch nationality but a Dutch track record will also suffice.

II.5 Self-assessment and additional documentation

As pointed out in Section I.6 above, SEP Section 5 and Appendix D call for further directions and clarification.

Where the SEP uses the term ‘self-assessment’, this protocol uses ‘self-evaluation report’ to clarify that it concerns part of the written documentation to inform the PRC (rather than the unit itself). More precisely, the documentation must be provided 1-2 months prior to the site visit, depending not only¹⁸ on the size but also on the number of the unit(s) to be assessed. For each single Unit of Assessment, the total set of documentation (hereinafter self-evaluation docs) comprises:

- the main text of the self-evaluation report, following the format of SEP Appendix D (max. 15 pages, including the SWOT explained in SEP Appendix D4) and further elaborated in Format 1 appended to this protocol
- a number of prescribed / formatted appendices to the self evaluation report:
 - SEP Table D1 (tailored indicators in two quality domains and three assessment dimensions)
 - a narrative illustrating Societal Relevance (3-5 pp., SEP Appendix D2)
 - SEP Tables D3a (research staff), D3c (research funding) and D3d (PhD candidates), as requested by the SEP (p. 24)
 - although the SEP is ambiguous about Table D3b (research output), this table is mandatory for Groningen (and most likely all other universities), as explained in Section I.7 above
 - a list of key publications / outputs: 5 aimed at an academic and 5 at a non-academic audience, plus the full text versions / descriptions, or links to them
- other relevant documents, including at least additional information on how:
 - academic integrity is ensured in the institute (e.g. a Research Data Management Plan)
 - PhD candidates are trained and supervised (e.g. a complementary explanation of the role of the Graduate School)

As evident from the SEP format for the ToR, all self-evaluation docs may be provided to the PRC on a secure website. However, it is advised to first ask the PRC members whether or not they wish to receive hard copies of parts A and B as well, and to provide these on request.

SEP Table D1 is new and deserves further clarification. The indicators listed in the six cells are no more than possible examples of the indicators to be provided. An explicit aim of this table is to allow each research unit the flexibility to choose its own indicators, tailored to the specific characteristics of its own discipline/sub-discipline and mission.

The three cells in the right half of the table (numbered 4-6) serve to demonstrate the production (cell 4), use (cell 5) and recognition (cell 6) of research output and activities aimed at societal stakeholders

¹⁸ The SEP only mentions size but has been formulated for the assessment of single units. For multi-unit assessments, the text should be interpreted more widely, as indicated in brackets.

(quality domain Relevance to Society). The 12 ‘preferred’ Groningen Valorization indicators mentioned in Section I.7 above can be assigned to these three cells, as illustrated in Appendix 4 below. However, not all of the 12 can be expected to match the characteristics and mission of each SEP institute or programme. Likewise, with national evaluation, units from different universities cannot be expected to strictly adhere to common indicators in all cells.

Groningen research units are therefore recommended to:

- include in Table D1 only those Groningen Valorization indicators that actually fit the own institute’s mission
- strive for some common indicators in each of the six cells of Table D1 that apply to all units to be jointly assessed
- and to supplement all cells with the unit’s own, tailored indicators; useful examples may be found in two KNAW reports on quality indicators¹⁹ and a UK Research Excellence Framework manual²⁰

Regarding the procedures for compiling and approval of the self evaluation docs, the following directions apply:

- The self-evaluation docs must be compiled by the SEP institute, which will also write most of the texts, apart from the section on the PhD programme, a draft of which is provided by the local Graduate School and subsequently supplemented by the institute.
- The documentation must be approved by the Faculty Board before it is submitted to the University’s Research Committee (UCW), 6-8 weeks prior to the PRC’s deadline.
- The UCW advises the Board on parts A. and B. of the documentation. Where necessary, it provides suggestions for improvement that are directly communicated to the Faculty Board and SEP institute, within 4 weeks of receipt.
- The Board will generally adopt a positive UCW advice prior to receiving the final documentation, subject to an adequate response to the UCW suggestions.
- The Department of R&V will subsequently receive the final version of the self-evaluation docs and check:
 - whether the UCW suggestions have been sufficiently incorporated or addressed
 - the quantitative information provided in SEP Table D3
 - as far as possible: SEP Table D1 and part C
- Regarding SEP Table D3a (research input), special attention must be paid to:
 - Research staff not employed by the University of Groningen (i.e. receiving no salary, ‘zero-hours contract’), such as emeriti, honorary professors or visiting staff. They may still produce output but do not count in the input tables, which is why their output should be excluded from SEP Table D3b but may be reported separately.
 - Scholarship PhD students form an exception: as agreed in the VSNU definitions, their research input is included in the FTE counts.
 - Employed research staff with another appointment at an external research institute. Their output may only be counted in so far as it is based on their Groningen position.

II.6 Site visit

See Section 6 of the SEP and Section II.4 above (*Action Plan*).

II.7 Assessment report + II.8 Follow-up

See SEP Section 7 for a description of the different stages of compilation, feedback and approval of the assessment report (here referred to as the PRC report). It also provides a timeframe (Table 2) that demands much faster publication of the Board’s final response to the PRC report (i.e. its position document) than the previous edition. In addition to the SEP guidelines, the following procedure will be adhered to:

¹⁹ For the [Humanities](#) and [Social sciences](#).

²⁰ See [Panel criteria and working methods](#).

- The comments of the research unit on factual inaccuracies in the PRC's first draft (correction phase) will be formulated by the management of the SEP institute but must be approved by the Faculty Board before sending to the PRC (2 weeks after receipt of 1st draft). The Board must receive a copy.
- Upon receipt of the PRC's second draft (4 weeks after the 1st draft; UCW receives a copy), the Board will ask the Faculty Board whether it approves of this version and to prepare a response (see below). Both the Board and the Faculty Board will check whether the report is complete, consistent with the SEP and meets the additional requirements laid down in the ToR or Discipline Protocol.
- If the latter conditions are not met, or if there is doubt, the Board will ask the PRC for additional information or clarification. The PRC is obliged to respond but not to adapt its assessment. After receiving the PRC's response and/or a next, final version of its report, the PRC will be formally discharged through a letter from the Board of the lead university.
- Before determining its position (8-12 weeks after the 1st draft), the Board will request the SEP institute and the Faculty Board to respond to the PRC's judgement and recommendations. The Faculty Board's response will focus on its main conclusions and measures.
- The UCW will be asked to advise on the Faculty's response, in particular whether it is deemed adequate, given the PRC report and the response of the SEP institute.
- The Board will discuss the Faculty's response plus the UCW advice with the Faculty Board at the next biannual meeting (BO), after which it will publish its final position document on the University's website, together with the PRC report (4 months after the 1st draft).
- A brief report on assessments, conclusions, recommendations and follow-up will be published in the University's annual report.
- Self-evaluation reports may also be published but are generally kept confidential. It is up to the Faculty Board to decide upon this.

Note that rejection of the PRC report is in fact impossible. Instead, the Board can decide to ignore the PRC's judgement and substantiate its decision in its position document. Alternatively, the PRC could be requested to move the most disputed parts from the report to a confidential management letter.

Management letter

As already stated in Sections I.1 and II.4 above, the PRC can decide or be instructed (in the ToR or the Discipline Protocol) to add confidential advice in a management letter to the Faculty Board and the Board. This should be based on interviews with the management of the SEP institute and concern sensitive information of a personal nature or be about the current or future position of a research programme. When needed, the Faculty Board, in consultation with the Board, will discuss the letter in a personal interview with the PRC's chair.

In the correction phase, the management may also request the PRC to move restricted parts of the draft report to a management letter, provided it has valid reasons to do so (such as a non-disclosure agreement with an external stakeholder).

In the follow-up, the Board will discuss the management letter with the Dean of the Faculty, who will request the management of the unit concerned to respond to the letter. The Board, in consultation with the Faculty Dean, will draw its final conclusions regarding the management letter and decide on any follow-up action deemed necessary.

Chapter III. Midterm reviews

As explained in Section I.2, the University of Groningen maintains the internal obligation to carry out self-evaluations of all research in between two external assessments. The midterm review (MTR) is organized in such a way that the workload is restricted to a minimum.

Aims

The MTR serves as an interim evaluation mainly aimed at preparing for the next external assessment. More specifically, its goals are to:

- monitor the strengths and weaknesses of the research unit (current position)
- check to what extent the planned measures in response to the previous external assessment have been realised (looking back)
- determine additional measures for further improvement during the next three years, in anticipation of the next external assessment (looking ahead)

Kick-off

By December of the year preceding a planned midterm review at the latest, the Board will send a letter requesting the Faculty Board to start the preparations and to propose a procedure for a review that meets the requirements described below. The Faculty's written proposal must be received within 2 months and must be approved by the Board. As a rule, no UCW advice will be asked.

Design

The midterm review comprises the following components:

- a description of the procedure followed
- a concise self-evaluation report according to Format 2 appended to this protocol; as a rule, the period to be evaluated will be confined to the three years following the previous external assessment
- a written advice from an expert panel, familiar but not directly associated with the SEP institute (e.g. the scientific advisory board, an ad hoc committee of other Directors), and based on the self-evaluation report
- a written response from the Faculty Board to the self-evaluation report and the advice of the expert panel

These four documents together will be referred to as the full MTR report.

Units of assessment

The MTR always addresses research at the level of the SEP institute, but may also zoom in at programme level, subject to the conditions described in Section I.4 above, summarized here:

- If the previous and/or next external assessment was or will be organized at programme level, the self evaluation must also be performed at programme level.
- If national or joint external assessment at programme level is not feasible, but the Faculty Board deems external evaluation of the programmes necessary, an extended midterm review can be proposed by the Faculty Board (see below).

Extended midterm review

An extended midterm review is based on the format for external assessments and external peer review, but generally invokes a lighter procedure than a regular external assessment. It may include a site visit by the PRC; however, this is not obligatory and up to the Faculty Board to decide. The outcome is primarily for internal use and does not have to be made public. It may be proposed by the Faculty Board in special circumstances, e.g. after major changes have occurred since the last external assessment.

Follow-up

- The full MTR report (see above) must be submitted to the UCW for advice.

- The UCW advice to the Board will focus on the question of whether the Faculty's response is adequate, given the self-evaluation report and the response of the expert panel. In addition, suggestions for improvements to the self-evaluation report may be provided.
- The Board will only discuss the Faculty's response with the Faculty Board in cases where there is a critical UCW advice. It will inform the Faculty Board of its final conclusions by letter.
- The University's annual report will mention which midterm reviews have been conducted and briefly describe the most relevant conclusions.