

Cover letter

On 26.09 2013, a committee was appointed to review NOSTER's self-appraisal and application for re-accreditation. The committee has consisted of Prof. Veena Das, Krieger-Eisenhower Professor of Anthropology and Director of Graduate Studies, John Hopkins University, Baltimore; Prof. Johan Cilliers, Professor of Homiletics and Liturgy, Stellenbosch University; and Prof. Jorunn Økland, Professor of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies in the Humanities and Director of the Centre for Gender Research, University of Oslo. The latter has served as the committee's chair. The report on the following pages is organized according to the committee's tasks as stated in the appointment document, although it should be added that since many of the committee's concerns are interlinked, they will (or might) appear under several headings.

In conclusion, the committee finds that NOSTER should be allowed to continue in its current form, with some adjustments. It has shown itself very apt to adjust to the shifting circumstances in HE occurring since the previous review, so there is no doubt it will continue to be proactive in maintaining its leading position also in the future. A well organised, joint national research school in a certain academic area is a great asset at the best of times, and a necessity in times when the area in question is under pressure. In this situation, institutions and researchers involved in NOSTER have made the right decision: joined forces and consolidated NOSTER as a clear priority.

Periodical Review of NOSTER

Brief description of the school, its vision, mission and objective(s), its educational and research activities

NOSTER is an abbreviation for the Dutch name of *Netherland's School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion*.

The school is directed by prof. A.J.A.C.M Korte, with Utrecht University as host. Its governing institutions also include a School Board, an Executive Board, and a Ph.D. Candidate Council.

Its members currently include all university institutions in the Netherlands (and one in Belgium) offering Ph.D.s in theology and/or religious studies, and in addition has partnerships with further universities in Belgium, Germany, UK, Israel and Sweden.

Its vision is to train Ph.D. candidates and ReMa students to become independent researchers. For this end, its mission is to offer them a high-quality study programme in theology and religious studies and to anchor their research in broader national and international communities of researchers and institutions. A strong vision of quality assurance cuts through all further objectives.

NOSTER offers students and researchers within relevant fields in the Dutch and Flemish areas a forum and a common platform for collaboration, knowledge broking, networking and development of ideas, as well as a point of contact with foreign academic organisations. It coordinates curricula at local and national level, and promotes the matching of researchers and external partners in order to enhance cooperation and funding.

Educational and research activities: The activities include (bi-)monthly seminars, inter-university courses, thematic groups and thematic meetings, and international conferences. They also include more professional and skills-based courses and programmes.

Given that NOSTER is a doctoral school, educational and research activities are closely linked. NOSTER matches shifting research groups working towards defined output (conferences, anthologies, periodicals, etc.) with doctoral courses and meetings. This *modus operandi* an efficient way of providing the education needed, within an interdisciplinary research context, while remaining within the tight limits of time and budget within which Ph.D.-students and their supervisors work today. Probably this also means added value for the senior scholars involved: they get in NOSTER something extra that they do not necessarily get in the respective disciplinary environments of their home institutions.

Reflection on the quality of the school (PhD-training, resources, research facilities, organisation and processes, leadership, reputation, positioning)

NOSTER comes across as very efficient in the areas of organization, processes and leadership.

A review on the quality of NOSTER must inevitably take into account the shrinking resources for the Humanities in Europe, the increasing emphasis on professionalization and packaging at the cost of serious long term attention to difficult issues on good and evil, or the making of the self that were the concerns of theology and religion; and accountability cultures that put more faith on easily measured outcomes. There is no doubt that NOSTER has given sustained

attention to redefining its role and its pedagogic practices in the context of this fast changing environment.

As a research and training platform NOSTER's signature attempts have been to initiate cooperation between different institutions and to offer additional resources by pooling the available expertise of senior scholars for the benefit of young scholars pursuing their PhD. Although the total number of PhDs has declined, graduate students registered in other universities are participating in some of the seminars. NOSTER has also tried to change the orientation of training toward a more interdisciplinary one although the traditional strengths of theology remain at the forefront. Finally, the emphasis on grant writing means that more resources and time are spent on teaching young scholars how to write fundable research proposals. A survey on the present positions of the alumni show that a large number of them do get jobs quite close to completion of PhD but also that only a minority of the PhDs take up academic positions.

While we appreciate the innovations made in pedagogic orientations, especially the attention to interdisciplinary concepts and methods, we suggest that NOSTER should address the following concerns:

- While the institutional and thematic cooperation has become broader, and while this has undoubtedly made NOSTER more robust AND flexible, we assume that at some point more strategic choices concerning organisation and future direction will have to be made. *We suggest that the balance between theology and religion, which have been combined in NOSTER's research and pedagogic agenda, could be better and more creatively re-imagined.* In the context of modern theology, the fields of religion and sexuality/violence/media/law, as well as the imagination of religious pluralism might be better developed. Generally more work could be done in the field of comparative religion in the PhD seminars. This might help to raise the profile of religious studies in general since the assumption of a completely secularized Europe has come in the way of developing skills for understanding the current place of religion in social and political life in Europe. *NOSTER would further strengthen its position in Europe if it found a creative way to fill this rapidly expanding knowledge and skills gap.* We are not suggesting that these themes should fall on the side of religion whereas more textual and hermeneutic methods should fall on the side of theology but rather that each field should be developed in the training programs in way that fertilizes the other.

- We note with satisfaction that many senior and well-known scholars are engaged in creating an intellectual space in which they can comment upon the work of the junior scholars, and also offer theme seminars. But we are concerned that a substantial part of the discussion seems to be on professionalization – how to write proposals, how to write the dissertation, how to engage with methodology. *If some workshops focused on professionalization, that might free the seminars to address the intellectual issues in the fields of theology and religion – such as discussion of concepts, evidence and forms of reasoning.*

- The endeavour of NOSTER to position itself within the international field and to expose students and colleagues to larger international and transnational discussions, is laudable. It is clear that the expert meetings and international conferences add value to this endeavour. *It is however also a question why the institutions with which NOSTER has a formal partnership should be restricted to being mainly European – with Tel Aviv University currently the only exception.*

There might be logistical difficulties in a more global expansion of these partnerships, but an inclusion of, for instance, institutions from Africa and South America, might enhance the global relevance of NOSTER, and obviously also vice versa. This could also result in more thematic groups and meetings with a truly global flavour. Of the thematic groups that gathered during 2005-2012 (appendix 3), for instance, only one was truly from abroad in abovementioned global sense, namely with South Africa on *Coping with Violence in the NT*).

- NOSTER is acquiring a strong international reputation but *this could be made stronger by highlighting the participation of NOSTER members in the activities of larger professional organizations such as the American Academy of Religion. There is also scope for further participation e.g. in the SSRC program on religion and secularism.*

Reflection on the productivity of the educational activities (PhD training and number of participants) and research activities (number and output of the thematic research groups & thematic seminars, and publications/STAR)

NOSTER should first of all be commended for not only maintaining, but also broadening and deepening its productivity of educational and research activities during the period 2005-2012, especially in the light of the realities of major institutional restructuring that has taken place, combined not only with the introduction of new systems, programmes and policies on a national level, but also significant re-focusing of financial capacities and general university budget cuts. This ability to adapt and reframe existing educational and research activities, already speaks of a high level of productivity, i.e. innovation as such. A significant example of the abovementioned innovative productivity would be the abolition of the division of the study programme into disciplinary sectors, and rather opting for a thematic approach with thematic groups and thematic meetings organised by NOSTER members, following a “bottom-up” method that seeks to focus on themes proposed by these members themselves. This opens up meaningful spaces for stronger interdisciplinary research and dialogue - in line with the stated research ethos of NOSTER as being a knowledge broker - but also further possibilities for societal relevance (see also underneath).

It is clear from the detailed information in especially appendixes 3, 4, 5, 7, 9 and 12 that NOSTER is producing a variety of high quality PhD training courses, thematic research groups and seminars and academic publications by a highly esteemed publisher, namely Brill. The graduation rate of PhD students that have obtained their degrees during 2005-2012 (appendix 12), gives a clear indication of the sustainable level of productivity exhibited by NOSTER, especially given the fact that not a single student has discontinued his or her studies during this period – indicative of the effective support system offered by NOSTER as a knowledge broker. It is important to note here that although the percentage of male and female Juniors (PhD candidates) stood on 50% each (benchmarked 1 January 2013), the differences on the Senior level (permanent staff and post-docs) are significant – male (73%) and female 27%. *It would be important for NOSTER to address this issue, and the reasons for this current imbalance, in future strategic planning.*

Reflection on the relevance of educational and research activities (in academia, in society, and with respect to valorisation)

NOSTER has taken significant steps to maintain and further its positioning in academia and society as an important and relevant role player, inter alia through technological networking and programme restructuring. The abovementioned movement away from a single common research programme (divided into traditional disciplinary sectors) towards a thematic approach that not only fosters interdisciplinary cooperation, but that also provides the context for NOSTER's PhD education, is a clear example of this quest for relevancy. It is furthermore also clear that real efforts are made to equip members of NOSTER for a "life after academia", seeing that a significant number of students do not take up a full-time academic positions – *another issue that might be worthwhile exploring further.*

It is noteworthy that NOSTER, besides offering study sessions and conferences dealing with subjects of general interest (e.g. financing, peer-reviewing, etc.), also organises numerous interdisciplinary meetings that bear fruit not only in terms of academic appointments, but also in terms of future networking by participants. *It could be asked whether a stronger emphasis on trans-disciplinarity could not prove to be of importance in the quest for relevance in academia and society, i.e. whether more meetings/ workshops/ conferences in collaboration with disciplines other than those related to theology and religion, would enhance the stature and positioning of NOSTER.* Cf. next paragraph.

Reflection on the vitality and feasibility, and vision for the future (strategy, competitive strength, robustness, stability and flexibility; earning capacity).

One key to further development of NOSTER is found in the first footnote's statement that religion and theology is increasingly studied from the perspectives of other disciplines within the Humanities and Social Sciences. With the restructuring of the field currently ongoing in North-Western Europe, *NOSTER is encouraged to explore even further how to structure its programme in a way that makes it the most attractive research school for students of theology and religion - also those based outside of the dedicated departments. The thematic groups that have now been implemented, should facilitate such exploration. NOSTER's sessions for grant writing might be decreased or re-imagined with a different format.* We appreciate the need for developing skills in proposal writing and making a case for research to be funded. However, such professionalization can come in the way of developing deeper understanding and learning to produce publishable research – which counts more than (most likely unsuccessful) research applications when young researchers apply for positions. While it is clear from the self-appraisal that more students are applying for funds, it is not clear as to how successful they have been in obtaining funding. *We recommend that students learn to access more international sources for funding to increase their chances AND learn to balance conflicting interests of time investment in application- as opposed to other writing. We also recommend that they get more training on how to write for professional journals.* There is a demand for skilled writing on religion through blogs, for advocacy groups, for NGOs and for government agencies. *Some workshops could be designed to address these forms of writing so that the research conducted in universities is disseminated among wider publics.*