

Research Assessment 2019

**Institute for Philosophy, Theology and
Religious Studies (PTR)**

Radboud University Nijmegen

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Radboud Universiteit



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1 Introduction

1.1 The Netherlands System of Quality Assessment of Research

An external committee of peers evaluated the research quality of the Institute for Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies (PTR) of Radboud University during a site visit in October 2019, and reports its findings in this document.

This quality assessment (peer review) is part of the assessment system for all publicly funded Dutch research organizations, as organized by the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) and the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).

The aims of this assessment system are: (1) improvement of research quality, and (2) accountability to the board of the research organization, and towards funding agencies, government and society at large. The assessment takes place at the level of research institutes and research programmes within the institutes. The site visit to each institute by an external committee, once every six years, is an essential part of the assessment system. A committee of peers is appointed and asked to review the research. Important elements of the site visit are the interviews the evaluation committee conducts with the management, the Institute's director and the group leaders, as well as with PhD students, postdoctoral researchers and junior staff members.

1.2 The Members of the Evaluation Committee

The Evaluation Committee consisted of:

Prof. Wiep van Bunge (Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands), Chair

Prof. Daniel Cohnitz (Utrecht University, The Netherlands)

Prof. Thomas Prügl (Universität Wien, Austria)

Prof. Auli Vähäkangas (University of Helsinki, Finland)

Prof. Antoon Vandavelde (KU Leuven, Belgium)

Sjoerd Mulder (Tilburg University, The Netherlands)

Dr. Jetje De Groof (Eduflow, Antwerp, Belgium) was appointed as secretary to the Committee.

A short bio of each of the members is included in Appendix 1.

All members of the Committee signed a statement of independence to ensure that they would judge without bias, personal preference or personal interest, and that their judgment is made

without undue influence from persons or parties committed to the institute or programmes under review, or from other stakeholders.

1.3 Scope of the Assessment

1.3.1 Research Institute for Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies

The Executive Board of Radboud University commissioned the assessment of the Research Institute for Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies (PTR). The PTR was founded in 2011 as the research institute of the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies of Radboud University. The Institute is organized in five research Centers: Center for the History of Philosophy and Science (CHPS); Center for Catholic Studies (CCS); Center for Cognition, Culture and Language (CCL); Center for Religion and Contemporary Society (CRCS); and the Center for Contemporary European Philosophy (CCEP). A description of the Institute can be found in section 1.2. of this report.

The Executive Board of Radboud University provided Terms of Reference for the Committee (TOR). The Committee is asked to assess the quality and relevance to society of the research conducted by the Institute as a whole as well as by its five research Centers for the period 2013-2018. It is also requested to assess the strategic targets of the Institute and the Centers and the extent to which they are equipped to achieve them. The Committee is expected to do so by providing a written assessment of the Institute's and Centers' performance on the three SEP assessment criteria ('research quality', 'relevance to society' and 'viability'). At the Institute level, the Committee is asked to assign a score (1, 2, 3 or 4) to each of these criteria, in accordance with the SEP guidelines. Finally, the Committee is asked to reflect on three other aspects at the Institute level: (1) PhD supervision and training, (2) research integrity, and (3) diversity.

The Committee operates according to the Standard Evaluation Protocol (SEP) for public scientific research in the Netherlands 2015-2021, which was drawn up by the KNAW, VSNU and NWO. The protocol specifies the information that must be provided to the Committee and the criteria for the research assessment.

1.3.2 National Research School NOSTER

National research schools are being assessed as part of a research unit at the host institution of the research school. PTR being the host institution for NOSTER, the Committee is also asked to include the assessment of NOSTER in the report. The TOR lists the main questions to be addressed by the Committee. They will be discussed in section 5 of this report.

1.4 Procedures followed by the Committee

Six weeks before the site visit, the Committee members received a self-evaluation report, containing the mission, vision, and ambition of the Institute and its research Centers as well as their academic results and societal impact in the period 2013-2018. Additional information was accessible on a secluded website. The Committee also received the TOR.

During the site visit (for the programme, see Appendix 2), the Committee members were welcomed by the Rector Magnificus of Radboud University. They met with the Dean, the director of the Institute and the coordinators of the research Centers. They interviewed the Faculty Board and the Institute director; representatives of the research Centers (who each gave a short presentation); post-docs and/or assistant professors; a group of PhD students; and the valorization coordinator. Additionally, the Committee interviewed the directors of Research School Noster and the Graduate School for the Humanities. Between the interviews, time was available to the Committee to discuss their findings. At the end of the visit, the Chair presented the main preliminary conclusions to the staff of PTR and the Faculty Board; the Rector Magnificus of Radboud University also attended this meeting.

After the site visit, the evaluation report was written, based on a template provided by Radboud University. When all Committee members had included their additions and comments, a final version was drawn up and sent to PTR for a check on factual errors. Finally, the report was delivered to the Executive Board of Radboud University.

1.5 Criteria and Assessment Scale

The Protocol requires the Evaluation Committee to assess the research on three main criteria of the Standard Evaluation Protocol:

- Research Quality (the level of the research conducted)
- Societal relevance (social, economic and cultural relevance of the research)
- Viability (strategy, governance and leadership)

The qualitative assessments are supplemented by assigning discrete categories (1-4): Excellent (1); Very good (2); Good (3); Unsatisfactory (4). The meaning of the categories in this four-point scale used in the assessment is described in the Standard Evaluation Protocol (see Appendix 4).

5 Assessment of the Research School NOSTER

Director:	Prof. dr. A.J.A.C.M. Korte, Utrecht University (2009-2016)
	Prof. dr. H.L. Murre-van den Berg, Radboud University (2017-June 2019)
	Prof. dr. F.J.S. Wijzen, Radboud University (July 2017-present)

5.1 Description of the Research School

The Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER) is the primary platform for research and training in the fields of theology and religious studies in the Netherlands and Flanders. Twelve research institutes in these fields have joined forces and provided a national research context and training programme for currently 176 senior researchers, 90 PhD candidates and 30 Research Master students. Its academic mission is to offer a cutting-edge and challenging curriculum in theology and religious studies for junior researchers (Research Master students and PhD candidates) of the participating institutions. The self-evaluation report explains that NOSTER has three major objectives. First of all, it wants to familiarize junior researchers with a range of research forms and methodologies in the field of theology and religious studies. Secondly, the programme provides specific training in the skills and techniques of the disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches in theology and religious studies. Thirdly, NOSTER aims to contribute to the formation of a national academic community in the field of theology and religious studies. Finally, NOSTER stimulates new initiatives and explorations in research and provides a national platform to foster communication between the participating institutes with a view to both short and long-term research collaboration.

Until the end of 2016, NOSTER was hosted at the Faculty of Humanities, Utrecht University. As of 1 January 2017, the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies of Radboud University (PTR) has functioned as NOSTER's host institution. The NOSTER School Board includes formal representatives from all participating institutions. The Board is responsible for strategic decision-making and annual budgets and report approval. NOSTER has two advisory bodies: the Junior Council consisting of four PhD candidates and, as of 2018, two ReMA students, which plays a key role in the evaluation processes of separate curriculum events and of the curriculum as a whole; and the Executive Board (EB) consisting of eight senior members from the participating institutions and two Junior Council members. NOSTER staff comprises 1.3 FTE in 2013-2016; 1.05 FTE in 2017-2018: a director (0.2 FTE in 2013-2016; 0.15 FTE in

2017-2018), an executive secretary (0.4 FTE), a curriculum coordinator (0.2 FTE) and a secretary (0.5 FTE in 2013-2016; 0.3 FTE in 2017-2018).

5.2 Evaluation of the Research School

In the TOR, the Committee is asked to address six questions in its assessment. The Committee addresses each one of these questions in the text below.

Regarding NOSTER's ambition, the self-assessment clearly reveals that NOSTER is not lacking ambition. The Committee appreciates the mission of NOSTER, and recommends that the research school continues to focus on influencing the national research agenda. The Committee also notes that this high ambition stands in stark contrast with the limited means that NOSTER has at its disposal. In terms of human resources, NOSTER's staff consists of only 1.05 FTE. This makes NOSTER vulnerable and highly dependent upon the cooperation of participating institutes and researchers. The major challenge for NOSTER, then, is related to the question of ownership: do the participating institutes, including the hosting institute, take the mission of NOSTER seriously, and are they willing to support NOSTER more?

The previous assessment (2014 ECOS report) identified three areas of concern: (1) its disciplinary and transdisciplinary positioning (both national and international); (2) its gender policies; (3) its long-term viability, especially with respect to PhD candidate numbers. With regard to the first area, the Committee was pleased to learn that NOSTER has taken several initiatives. It launched thematic seminars as well as Research Collaboration Groups, it attempted (with limited success) to contribute to the *Nationale Wetenschapsagenda*, and it contributed to the protocol for Research Assessment in the Humanities. Also it briefly addressed the KNAW-recommendation to start a Netherlands Academy of Religion, with a national research agenda and a common theme, but this initiative was discontinued. Members of the research school are working on a collaborative grant proposal for the next round of *Zwaartekracht* funding. Finally, NOSTER is in the process of creating an online theology and religious studies portal that actively and collectively showcases the diverse and complicated landscape of the study of religion, with as many cross-references and search options as possible.

With regard to the second issue that was addressed, the gender balance, NOSTER states in its self-evaluation report that it continues to be a cause for concern, with a (considerable) majority of men in higher positions.

Concerning NOSTER's long-term-viability NOSTER mentions in its self-evaluation report that while the total number of PhD candidates increased strongly in the first years of the period

2013-2018, it has decreased in recent years. This decline has had an effect on NOSTER's income, as institutions pay €1k for the whole membership period of a new PhD candidate. NOSTER identifies as a possible cause for the decline the closure of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) Programme 'Religion in Modern Society' (2013-2018), which yielded several PhD candidates. Additionally, the participating institutions have little funding available for full-time PhD candidates. NOSTER concludes that, against this background, the success of NOSTER's PhD programme, is largely dependent on the institutions' successes in acquiring grants in the field that enable them to hire new PhD candidates.

The committee is of the opinion that NOSTER has taken seriously the challenges identified by the ECOS 2014 report. Nevertheless, it seems that NOSTER has so far failed to meet these challenges. In fairness, the committee finds it difficult to pass judgement on NOSTER, in view of its essential dependence of the results achieved by the participating institutions and their researchers. The Committee is fully aware of the largely virtual nature of many joint research schools in the Netherlands, and in view of the limited investment the partners are prepared to make in NOSTER it would not be fair to hold its current staff responsible for the little progress made since 2014.

On the basis of the self-evaluation report and the discussions during the site visit, the Committee comes to the conclusion that the NOSTER curriculum offers a very valuable contribution to PhD education in the field of theology and religious studies. This is reflected in the relatively high number of participants in the various research seminars it offers. It is therefore essential that the quality of these seminars remains high, and it is good to see that the NOSTER staff including the Junior Council go at great lengths to evaluate the seminars that are offered. As such, it seems that NOSTER is sufficiently monitoring the quality of the courses and seminars, and that NOSTER itself has a good overview of possible challenges.

NOSTER noted during the interviews that some seminars don't attract enough students, for example in biblical studies and church history seminars. The Committee recommends that NOSTER tries to find other ways to help the remaining students in these fields to grow as a researcher. For example, church historians could be directed to seminars of e.g. the Huizinga Institute.

The Committee acknowledges that NOSTER's main contribution to the field of research in theology and religious studies presently lies in its bringing together and training of researchers, rather than in drawing up a national agenda. This is especially true for the training of junior researchers; activities aimed towards senior researchers in general seem to

suffer from a lack of funds. Yet, it seems to the Committee that NOSTER has constantly looked for ways to provide added value to the field as a whole.

The Committee regrets that the KNAW suggestion to establish a Netherlands Academy of Religion appears to have been abandoned. In a time where the topic of religion is often no longer assigned to specialized faculties of theology and religious studies, the Committee welcomes NOSTER's commitment to draw up a research agenda nationally. For such an agenda to succeed, the committee believes, NOSTER should be careful not to compete with the various agendas of the particular institutions, but rather seek to support collaborations where possible, and as such strengthen the otherwise fragmented field of theology and religious studies. The Committee believes that, in order for a national research agenda to succeed, both the hosting organization, and all participating institutes must be enticed to cooperate. Also, the question of ownership is important: do the participating institutes take their involvement in NOSTER seriously?

The Committee concludes that NOSTER has a realistic view of its strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities. In terms of recommendations, the Committee would in general suggest that, in the light of the low amount of resources and staff, NOSTER more clearly prioritizes its ambitions. The core functions of NOSTER seem to be the training of junior - and to a lesser extent senior - researchers, and these tasks are highly appreciated.

Furthermore, the Committee welcomes the ambition of NOSTER to draw up a national research agenda. However, after the failure of the NAR, it is obvious that this poses many challenges. The Committee believes that such an ambition is feasible, but only when NOSTER succeeds in addressing the question of ownership: on the one hand, the participating institutes must be enticed to cooperate more structurally in NOSTER; on the other hand, the University Board of the hosting faculty must be approached and engaged in order to understand that the hosting of a Research school is a valuable opportunity for the university to visibly impact the field, and thus that it should offer more support for this challenge.

Appendix 1: Short Curricula Vitae of the Evaluation Committee members

Wiep van Bunge (Chair) took his BA and MA at Utrecht University, was drafted into the army, and next was awarded his PhD at Erasmus University Rotterdam, having submitted a thesis on the seventeenth-century amateur philosopher Johannes Bredenburg (1990). In 2000 he was appointed on the endowed chair of the Dutch Spinoza Society and two years later he was made a full professor. From 2004 to 2012 he served as dean of the Erasmus School of Philosophy. Among his books are *From Stevin to Spinoza* (2001), *Spinoza Past and Present* (2012), and *From Bayle to the Batavian Revolution* (2019). He also (co-)edited several titles, including *Disguised and Overt Spinozism* (1996), Balthasar Bekker's *Die bezauberte Welt* (1997), *The Early Enlightenment in the Dutch Republic* (2003), *The Dictionary of Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Dutch Philosophers* (2003), *Pierre Bayle, le philosophe de Rotterdam* (2008), and *The Bloomsbury Companion to Spinoza* (2014). In addition, he was a member of the team directed by Antony McKenna that edited Pierre Bayle's *Correspondance* (1999-2017). He is an elected member of both the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) and the Royal Holland Society of Sciences and Humanities (KHMW).

Daniel Cohnitz (Member) holds the chair for theoretical philosophy at Utrecht University. Cohnitz studied philosophy, German literature and language, and history at the Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf. After graduating with an M.A. degree in philosophy and medieval history, he worked at the Institute of Philosophy at Düsseldorf and at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Duisburg-Essen. In 2005 he defended his dissertation on *Thought Experiments in Philosophy (Gedankenexperimente in der Philosophie)* at Düsseldorf. From 2006 to 2015 he was professor of theoretical philosophy at the University of Tartu in Estonia. Since January 2016 he is professor of theoretical philosophy in Utrecht and since 2019 head of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies of Utrecht University.

Thomas Prügl (Member) received a licentiate and a doctorate in Catholic Theology from Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, specializing in Church History and medieval theology. In 2001 he was appointed assistant professor and in 2004 promoted to associate professor and Tisch Family Chair of Medieval Theology at the University of Notre Dame (Indiana, USA). In 2005-2006 he served as Acting Director of the Medieval Institute at Notre Dame. In 2008, he was appointed on the chair of Church History at the University of Vienna (Austria). Among his books are *Die Ekklesiologie Heinrich Kalteisens OP in der Auseinandersetzung mit dem Basler Konziliarismus* (1995); *Antonio da Cannara: De potestate pape supra Concilium Generale contra errores Basiliensium. Einleitung, Kommentar und Edition* (1996) and, as co-author, *Handbuch der Bibelhermeneutik. Von Origenes bis zur*

Gegenwart (2016). He co-edited volumes on *Kirchenbild und Spiritualität. Dominikanische Beiträge zur Ekklesiologie und zum kirchlichen Leben im Mittelalter* (2007) and *Bibelstudium und Predigt im Dominikanerorden. Geschichte, Ideal, Praxis* (2019). He is editor in chief of *Archa Verbi. Yearbook for the Study of Medieval Theology* and co-editor of the journal *Annuario Historiae Conciliorum*.

Antoon Vandeveld (**Member**) studied economics and philosophy. He graduated in 1986 at KU Leuven with a PhD on *Exchange and Recognition*. He has been full professor at the Centre for Economics and Ethics of KU Leuven until his superannuation in 2017. He was Dean of the Institute of Philosophy of KU Leuven from 2008 until 2015. Formerly he has been teaching for a long time at the universities of Antwerp and Rotterdam. Currently he continues to teach courses in *Political Philosophy*, *Social Ethics* and *Social and Political Philosophy* at KU Leuven. He published many articles, mainly in the field of economic ethics and political philosophy, for instance about philosophy of social security, migration policy, responsibility for future generations, altruism and the logic of the gift, liberalism and communitarianism. Together with G. Erreygers, he edited a book on *Is Inheritance Legitimate? – Ethical and Economic Aspects of Wealth Transfers* (Springer, 1997). Other books are on *Gifts and Interests* (Peeters, 2000), on *Autonomy and Paternalism* (with Thomas Nijs en Yvonne Denier, Peeters, 2007) and on *Justice, Luck and Responsibility in Health Care* (with Yvonne Denier and Chris Gastmans, Springer, 2013). Recently he published in Dutch *Het geweld van geld* (Lannoo Campus, 2017).

Auli Vähäkangas (**Member**) completed her MTh in 1992 and ThD in 2004 both at the University of Helsinki, Finland. She was lecturer at the Makumira University College (MUCo), Tanzania 1998-2005. After returning to Finland, she was first lecturer at Diaconia University of Applied Sciences before joining University of Helsinki in 2009. She was a Vice dean, Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki 2014-2017. Vähäkangas was appointed as a full professor in practical theology in 2015. She is the author of *Christian Couples Coping with Childlessness. Narratives from Machame, Kilimajaro*. Vähäkangas' research has focused on those in vulnerable situations: sexual minorities, childless people and hiv-positives in their communities. She co-led the South-African-Nordic research project *Youth at the Margins. A comparative study of the contribution of faith-based organisations to social cohesion in South Africa and Nordic Europe (YOMA)* (2013-2017). At the moment she is leading a Finnish multidisciplinary project *Meaningful relations: Patient and family carer encountering death at home* (2017-2021).

Sjoerd Mulder (**Student-member**) studied Theology at Utrecht University, and currently is PhD student at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Tilburg University (public defense in

May 2020). He teaches Systematic Theology and Ecumenism at the 'Fontys Hogeschool Theologie en Levensbeschouwing', is a regular contributor to the Religion section of daily newspaper *Trouw*, and member of the jury for the "Annual Award for the Best Dutch Theological Book".