

# RESEARCH EVALUATION 2025

## NOSTER

Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion



**Radboud Universiteit**



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# Content

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. Evaluation method and procedures</b>	<b>6</b>
1.1. Assessment objectives and criteria	6
1.2. Composition of the assessment committee	6
1.3. Documentation	7
1.4. Working method	7
<b>2. Findings and recommendations</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1. Introduction	8
2.2. General findings	9
2.3. Quality of PhD education	9
2.4. Added value as a national forum for the discipline	11
<b>3. Appendices</b>	<b>14</b>
3.1. Appendix 1: Programme for the site visit	14
3.2. Appendix 2: Participating institutions in the research school	16
3.3. Appendix 3: Income and expenses	17

# Executive summary

## Findings

Since 2017, the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies (PTR) at Radboud University has served as the host university for NOSTER. During the period under review, NOSTER has demonstrated resilience in the face of increasing costs and limited financial resources, adapting creatively in order to maintain and strengthen its role as a national platform for PhD education in theology and religious studies. The school has focused its efforts on supporting junior researchers, prioritizing the education of PhD candidates and ReMA students while also fostering a national academic community. Its leadership has successfully secured its position by offering high-quality training, networking opportunities, and career support, as well as remaining responsive to evolving disciplinary and interdisciplinary developments.

NOSTER's curriculum is structured around seminars, courses, and central events, providing in-depth training in sub-disciplines, broad methodological perspectives, and opportunities for community building. Recent initiatives, such as a pilot programme in ancient languages as well as writing retreats, illustrate the school's responsiveness to the specific needs of its participants. The committee appreciates that junior researchers are actively involved in advisory boards, influencing curriculum development and contributing to course evaluation and event planning. It notes that this engagement reflects both student commitment and the academic value attributed by students to NOSTER, which became apparent during interviews with junior and senior researchers.

The school has actively sought collaboration with other national research schools and has initiated international partnerships. These initiatives pool resources, enhance expertise, and foster innovation through diverse perspectives. NOSTER's community-building efforts – including central events, shared teaching and digital speed dates – have strengthened cross-institutional networks and provided constructive forums for academic exchange and career development.

An impressive growth in membership, partly driven by strategic decisions such as waiving fees for external PhD candidates, has increased the school's visibility, credibility, and influence as a national forum. Investments in the digital platform *Religienet* and the school's quarterly newsletter have enhanced communication, participation, and cohesion within the community and with a broader audience. While the school's efforts to establish a national research agenda through major grant applications met with limited success, smaller-scale grant initiatives have fostered collaboration and identified emerging research themes.

Despite these strengths, challenges remain regarding institutional ownership and financial viability. Participating institutions vary in their structural commitment, which affects staff availability for seminars and courses. Financial sustainability is a concern due to limited indexing of personnel costs and broader funding pressures. The committee considers maintaining experienced leadership and exploring new collaborative opportunities with professional organizations essential for NOSTER's continued impact and stability.

Overall, the committee concludes that NOSTER's strategic vision, commitment to junior researchers, and capacity for innovation position it as a vital and forward-looking hub for doctoral education and community-building in theology and religious studies.

## **Recommendations**

- Explore how junior researchers can serve as ambassadors to increase participation in and visibility of NOSTER's activities.
- Maximize the networking potential of central events for both junior and senior researchers, as this aspect is highly valued.
- Continue to collaborate with other research schools and member institutions to streamline academic and career-focused provision and to reduce overlap.
- Clarify institutional obligations regarding PhD candidates' engagement in NOSTER activities, including minimum EC requirements.
- Strengthen viability by seeking partnerships with professional organizations.

# I. Evaluation method and procedures

In 2024, the Executive Board of Radboud University commissioned an evaluation of the Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion, of which the Research Institute of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies (PTR) at Radboud University is the coordinator. The evaluation is part of a regular six-year quality assurance cycle. This evaluation is a component of a broader research assessment encompassing PTR itself, NOSTER and the Dutch Research School of Philosophy, which is also coordinated by PTR. A committee of international experts in the relevant disciplines was appointed to execute evaluations. For NOSTER, the evaluation covered the 2019-2024 period.

## I.1. Assessment objectives and criteria

The evaluation of NOSTER has the dual purpose of improving its quality and relevance, and of providing accountability to the Executive Board of Radboud University, funding bodies, government and society. The outcomes of this evaluation will inform quality assurance initiatives and strategic development for the research school in the coming period.

The research evaluation adheres to the aims and methods outlined in the Strategy Evaluation Protocol 2021-2027. It follows the terms of reference for national research schools in the humanities, issued in 2023 by the Council of Deans of the Faculties of Arts and Humanities in the Netherlands. According to these terms, the committee evaluated:

- the quality of the education of PhD candidates provided by NOSTER,
- the added value of NOSTER as a national forum for the discipline in the period 2019 up to and including 2024, against the background of its own mission statement and formulated goals.

## I.2. Composition of the assessment committee

The board appointed an assessment committee (hereafter: ‘committee’) of seven external peers:

- Prof. Joel Anderson, professor of Moral Psychology and Social Philosophy, Utrecht University (chair);
- Dr. Hanne Jacobs, associate professor of Philosophy at Tilburg University;
- Prof. Justin Kroesen, professor in Material Culture of Christianity, University of Bergen;
- Dr. Kristina Liefke, *Juniorprofessor* of Philosophy of Information and Communication at Ruhr University Bochum;
- Prof. Catrin Williams, professor in New Testament Studies, University of Wales Trinity Saint David;

- Prof. Catherine Wilson, emerita professor of Early Modern Philosophy, University of York;
- Maarten Holtzapffel, MA, PhD candidate in Religious Studies, Utrecht University

Mariette Huisjes, MA, was appointed independent secretary to the committee.

### **1.3. Documentation**

Prior to the site visit, the committee received the Strategy Evaluation Protocol 2021-2027, the terms of reference for the evaluation, and the research school's self-evaluation report, including the information and appendices required by the protocol. Additionally, some statements and regulations on social safety were sent to the committee, as well as application criteria for NOSTER research funding and for the funding of conferences.

### **1.4. Working method**

Leading up to the site visit, the committee members were all first requested to study the documentation provided by the research school and formulate preliminary findings and questions. During an online kick-off meeting on 12 May 2025, the committee members were introduced to each other and to the evaluation procedure. Also, a practical working method was agreed upon. After this meeting, the committee sent a list of factual questions to PTR on all of the research units to be evaluated, with a few questions on NOSTER as well. These questions were duly answered.

Since the evaluation of the research school was part of a larger evaluation and there was a full programme for the three days on which the committee visited Radboud University, additional online interviews with PhD candidates and senior researchers participating in NOSTER were scheduled before the site visit. They took place on 17 June 2025. The site visit to Radboud University took place from 24 until 26 June. On 24 June, the committee interviewed the leadership of both research schools. The visit concluded with a plenary presentation by the chair on the committee's findings. The programme for the site visit is included in appendix 1.

Following the site visit, the committee members provided written input for the evaluation report, which was compiled into an initial draft by the secretary. This draft was circulated among all committee members and then revised to incorporate their feedback. Subsequently, the report was submitted to the research school for factual corrections and comments. After incorporating these comments, in close consultation with the chair, the secretary finalized the report. The final version was presented to the Executive Board of Radboud University on 25 November 2025.

## 2. Findings and recommendations

### 2.1. Introduction

The Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER) is the primary platform for postgraduate training and research in the fields of theology and religious studies in the Netherlands and Flanders. Twelve research institutes in these fields have joined forces and currently provide a national research context and training programme for about 250 PhD candidates, 90 research master (ReMA) students and 300 senior researchers. For a full list of the participating institutes, see appendix 2.

Since 2017, the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies (PTR) of Radboud University has served as NOSTER's host institution. Its current second term as host will conclude at the end of 2026. In October 2026 the Board decides which institution will become NOSTER's new host for 2027-2031.

#### Mission and strategy

NOSTER offers a cutting-edge and challenging curriculum in theology and religious studies for junior researchers, building upon and complementing what the graduate schools of their home institutions have on offer. In addition, NOSTER stimulates new initiatives and explorations in research and provides a national platform for fostering communication between the participating institutes to enable them to engage in short-term and long-term research collaboration.

The most recent NOSTER policy plan (2022-2026) addresses three main issues: how to attract more junior members; how to attract, reach and support more senior researchers; and how to deal with increasing costs and limited financial resources.

With respect to the recommendation by the previous assessment committee about identifying the school's strategic priorities NOSTER has made it clear both internally and in its external communication that its priority is the training of ReMA students and PhD candidates.

#### Governance

NOSTER operates under the auspices of the Council of Deans of the Faculties of Arts and Humanities (DLG), which has primary responsibility for the regulatory and financial framework within which all research schools in the humanities operate. The specialized universities participating in NOSTER have signed an agreement of cooperation, subordinated to the *Common Regulation 2022-2026* for research schools in the humanities domain. All twelve institutions have equal rights and responsibilities.

NOSTER is governed on a daily basis by an academic director, under the supervision of a board that includes representatives from all twelve participating institutions, typically the rector of a university or the dean of a faculty. The board meets three times a year and is responsible for strategic decision-making and annual budgets and approval of progress reports. In addition, NOSTER has two advisory bodies. The Junior Council – consisting of three to four PhD candidates and one to two ReMA students – plays a key role in the evaluation processes of NOSTER’s curriculum, and assists in the planning and organization of events. The Advisory Council – consisting of five to seven senior members and two junior members from the Junior Council – advises the academic director and the board regarding finance, curriculum, and research policies.

## **2.2. General findings**

NOSTER has adapted creatively to fluctuating circumstances during the period under review, building on its strengths and seeking out new opportunities to fulfil its mission and core aims. During the past few years, partly in response to the previous assessment report, it has centred its ambitions on junior researchers by prioritizing the education of PhD candidates and ReMA students. The committee is of the opinion that the leadership of NOSTER has been highly successful in finding new ways to secure its position as a national platform for offering high-quality training programmes and for providing support, networking and career-development opportunities for PhD researchers in the fields of theology and religious studies.

## **2.3. Quality of PhD education**

### **Goals and structure of the curriculum**

The programme that NOSTER offers to junior researchers has three major goals. Firstly, it provides further training in the skills and techniques of the sub-disciplines in which participants operate. Secondly, the programme familiarizes junior researchers with various forms of research and research methodology, offering a wide variety of perspectives from both theology and religious studies. Thirdly, NOSTER contributes to the formation of a national academic community in the field of theology and religious studies by stimulating interaction and exchange between junior and senior researchers, sensitizing them to innovative disciplinary and interdisciplinary developments, and developing theoretical and methodological alternatives. In short: the school promotes advanced understanding, broadening of horizons, and community building. In order to realize these goals, the curriculum offers annual or biannual modules falling under three categories: seminars, courses, and central events. Seminars immerse participants in a specific (sub-)discipline or a topic under the supervision of (usually) two experts in the field from different member institutions. Courses are shorter modules that focus on advanced understanding of a particular theme, method, language, or book; they are offered annually or biannually and can be completed within a few weeks or months. Finally, central events foster community building and

broaden the horizons of the participants. There is a kick-off event in September with a multidisciplinary discussion of a specific theme, a midyear meeting in February focusing on professional development, and, finally, the two-day spring conference in April consisting of presentations by junior members, workshops and a keynote lecture by a leading scholar in the field.

NOSTER regularly revises and updates its curriculum. Recently, the school has implemented a pilot for ancient languages (Coptic and Syriac) that are important for the study of Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity and for which training cannot be offered at the local institutions due to likely low enrolments. In addition to the curriculum, NOSTER has offered writing retreats and also travel grants that make it possible for junior researchers to attend and present at international conferences.

### **Findings and recommendations**

Based on the documentation and the interviews, the committee found that NOSTER continues to offer a solid and wide-ranging curriculum as well as robust training in the skills and techniques required by junior researchers working in the fields of theology and religion. Among the school's strengths is its ability to balance the needs of individual students and groups through its seminars and courses. The board's decision to prioritize the training of junior researchers is supported by senior members, which is also a strength. The recently developed pilot language scheme is a good example of catering to the needs of junior researchers.

NOSTER's academic provision is held in high regard by those interviewed by the assessment committee, with students expressing enthusiasm for its central events, content-related courses, and writing retreats. This impression is supported by consistently high course ratings (8.3–8.8/10). The committee is pleased to see that junior researchers play a decisive role in NOSTER's two advisory boards (the Junior Council and Advisory Council), actively shaping the curriculum and making a significant contribution to the school's processes of evaluation and quality assurance and in the planning of its events. This reflects their strong commitment to NOSTER and the academic value they attach to its provision, which became clear during the committee's interviews with junior researchers. The committee's advice to NOSTER is that it considers how to make more effective use of its junior researchers as ambassadors to promote its various activities, given that it is NOSTER's ambition to attract more junior participants.

The committee finds it commendable that NOSTER actively searches for new forms of cooperation. During the period under review, NOSTER has offered or designed modules in cooperation with fellow research schools in the Netherlands, such as the Netherlands Interuniversity School for Islamic Studies and the Dutch Research School of Philosophy. In addition, NOSTER has experimented with international collaboration, which resulted in reciprocal access to modules and a NOSTER conference in Münster in spring 2026. Such initiatives allow research schools to pool resources, access complementary expertise, and increase their visibility and impact despite limited funding. It also fosters innovation through diverse perspectives. The

committee therefore considers these collaborative initiatives to be a particularly positive development.

For the purpose of future-proofing, the committee encourages NOSTER to explore further how it can work with other research schools and member institutions to streamline its academic and career-focused provision and thus avoid actual or potential overlap with other training programmes.

## 2.4. Added value as a national forum for the discipline

### Community building

NOSTER is to be commended for the ways in which it facilitates interaction and community-building through its various events. Junior researchers comment positively on the strong sense of community and inclusivity that NOSTER affords them, creating a conducive environment for peer exchange as well as interaction with senior researchers. As a result, PhD candidates often voluntarily take more seminars and courses than required. In addition to providing a valuable forum for discussing career development and possibilities outside academia, the annual spring conference has been highlighted as a particularly open and constructive environment for networking. Given, moreover, that senior scholars also regard NOSTER's central events and the co-teaching of seminars and courses as an excellent opportunity for them to connect with colleagues in different member institutions, the school's leadership may wish to explore how it can maximize the impact of its activities as networking opportunities for both junior and senior researchers.

### Positive developments

The NOSTER community has experienced an impressive growth in numbers during the period under review. The leadership's strategic decision to waive membership fees for external – mostly self-funded – PhD candidates ('buitenpromovendi') has led to a marked increase in registrations. This is coupled by a significant rise in the number of ReMA and internal PhD enrolments between 2022 and 2025. The membership of senior researchers has also more than doubled during this period. This growth not only strengthens the school's network, it increases knowledge exchange, collaboration opportunities, and the diversity of expertise available; it also enhances the credibility and influence of NOSTER as a national forum.

Another positive development has been the decision to invest substantial funds into the development of *Religienet*, the online portal for showcasing disciplines and scholarly discussions in the fields of theology and religion in the Netherlands. This website, together with the quarterly newsletter, reaches out to a wider audience. It enhances NOSTER's visibility and channels of communication, strengthens its cohesiveness, and leads to improved attendance at its events.

NOSTER's organization of 'digital speed dates' for its members is an effective way of facilitating cross-institutional conversations on short-term and longer-term research collaboration, which should in turn reignite plans for working

together on major grant applications. This is another compelling example of NOSTER's added value to the field.

### Grant capture

At the start of the period under review, NOSTER made efforts to establish a national research agenda for the fields of theology and religious studies, particularly through the development of a major NWO Gravitation grant. These efforts eventually had to be halted, due to their high costs and limited success. The school has nevertheless been able to build on this collaborative experience and is currently seeking to support less ambitious initiatives relating to grant capture. This includes a €10k starting grant to set up exchanges between scholars at various career stages, with the aim of identifying potentially significant themes – such as the role of religion in debates about paid and unpaid work or about migration – and strategies for developing more modest grant applications. The committee commends NOSTER for turning earlier challenges into constructive initiatives that foster collaboration and support emerging research themes.

### Institutional ownership

The previous assessment report noted an issue of institutional ownership: Do the participating institutes take their involvement in NOSTER seriously? This issue remains as yet unresolved. Participating institutions continue, in varying degrees, to display insufficient structural commitment, and this despite their acknowledgement of the value of NOSTER's work. One concern is the variety in the degree of commitment between the institutions. In several cases, institutions exhibit inconsistency in registering new ReMA students, PhD candidates, and senior staff members with NOSTER, and do not consistently adhere to the requirement as agreed in the Council of Deans in Arts and Humanities that ReMA students complete a minimum of 10 ECs of coursework with a national research school. Whereas PhD candidates from certain institutions participate actively in NOSTER's training and activities, doctoral education at other institutions appears to proceed largely independently of the network of national research schools that includes NOSTER. To address these persistent gaps in commitment and participation, the committee recommends that clarification should be sought about the level of obligation placed on PhD candidates to engage with the activities of NOSTER, including the minimum number of ECs to be completed by junior researchers through enrolment on seminars and courses. The lack of clarity on these issues makes it difficult for NOSTER's staff to plan effectively in relation to curricular and budgetary matters. It is therefore recommended that the Council of Deans of the Faculties of Arts and Humanities (DLG) takes more forceful action with regard to their institutions and that it provides them with a clearer framework and set of guidelines on junior researchers' stipulated levels of engagement with NOSTER's activities.

### Viability

In light of the challenging current financial climate for humanities in the Netherlands, the committee has some concern about the future financial viability of NOSTER, including the lack of indexing in year-to-year funding of its personnel costs. To ensure that it continues to undertake the kind of

proactive work which enables cross-institutional collaborations and conversations to take place, in the committee's view it is vital that the school's daily operations are overseen by staff with knowledge and experience of the relevant fields.

To further enhance viability, the committee recommends that NOSTER explores new possibilities of collaboration with professional organizations and funded subject associations in the Netherlands. These bodies can provide additional networking opportunities for junior researchers and also strengthen the visibility of NOSTER and help it maintain momentum. Ensuring both institutional support and innovative partnerships will help NOSTER secure its critical role in advancing research and training in theology and religious studies in the Netherlands.

### 3. Appendices

#### 3.1. Appendix I: Programme for the site visit

##### Tuesday June 17

Location: Online

9.00 – 9.15 Preparatory meeting (committee only)

Research School NOSTER

9.15 – 9.45 Interview with PhD candidates

9.45 – 10.05 Interview with senior researchers

10.05 – 10.15 Recap by committee

10.15 – 10.25 Break

Research school OZSW

10.25 – 10.55 Interview with PhD candidates

10.55 – 11.15 Interview with senior researchers

11.15 – 11.25 Recap by committee

##### Tuesday, June 24

Location: Hotel Van der Valk, Nijmegen-Lent

14.15 – 15.00 Welcome and introduction by the dean & introduction by director of research and research office

15.00 – 16.30 Preparation of site visit (committee only)

16.30 – 17.10 Interview with Research School NOSTER

17.10 – 17.30 Closed session committee

17.30 – 18.10 Interview with Research School OZSW

18.10 – 18.30 Closed session committee

##### Wednesday, June 25

Location: Radboud University campus

9.00 Welcome by the rector magnificus in the presence of the director of research and the heads/research coordinators of the research centers

9.15 – 9.30 Closed session committee

9.30 – 10.10	Interview with Center for Cognition, Culture and Language (CCCL)
10.10 – 10.30	Closed session committee
10.30 – 11.10	Interview with Center for Contemporary European Philosophy (CCEP)
11.10 – 11.30	Closed session committee
11.30 – 12.10	Interview with Center for the History of Philosophy and Science (CHPS)
12.10 – 12.30	Closed session committee
12.30 – 13.30	LUNCH (Committee only)
13.30 – 14.10	Interview with Center for Religion and Contemporary Society (CRCS)
14.10 – 14.30	Closed session committee
14.30 – 15.10	Interview with Center for Textual, Historical, and Systematic Studies of Judaism and Christianity (CTHS)
15.10 – 15.30	Closed session committee. Coffee/ tea break
15.30 – 16.10	Interview with Radboud Center for Philosophy and Society (RCPS)
16.10 – 16.30	Closed session committee
16.30	Break (coffee/tea etc.)
16.45 – 17.15	Interview with Radboud Reflects
17.15 – 17.35	Closed session committee

### Thursday, June 26

Location: Radboud University campus

8.45	Closed session/preparation committee
9.00 – 9.30	Interview with Assistant and Associate Professors
9.30	Closed session committee. Coffee/ tea break
9.50 – 10.20	Interview with Postdocs
10.20	Closed session committee
10.40 – 11.10	Interview with PhD candidates
11.10	Closed session committee. Coffee/tea break
11.30 – 12.00	Interview with Graduate School of the Humanities (GSH)
12.00	Closed session committee
12.20 – 13.00	Meeting with the board of the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies, the director of research and the grant advisor
13.00	Closed session committee
13.20 – 14.15	LUNCH (committee only)
14.15 – 16.30	Committee meeting to discuss results and preparation of site visit report
16.30	Presentation of preliminary findings, Erasmus building 15 <sup>th</sup> floor
+/- 16.45	Informal gathering and drinks
+/- 17.30	End of program

### **3.2. Appendix 2: Participating institutions in the research school**

<b>Institutions</b>	<b>Relevant units at each institution</b>
Evangelical Theological Faculty, Leuven, BE	N/A
Protestant Theological University	N/A
Leiden University	Leiden University Centre for the Study of Religion
Radboud University, Nijmegen	Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies
Theological University Apeldoorn	N/A
Theological University Utrecht	N/A
Tilburg University	Tilburg School of Catholic Theology & Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences
University of Amsterdam	Capacity Group Religious Studies
University of Groningen	Faculty of Religion, Culture and Society
University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht	N/A
Utrecht University	Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam	School of Religion and Theology

### 3.3. Appendix 3: Income and expenses

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
<i>Total income</i>	85	100	96	117	117	119
Expenses on staff and overhead costs	82	89	81	88	93	103
Expenses related to teaching	18	5	4	6	12	12
Expenses related to research collaboration	3	0	0	3	2	28
Expenses related to Gravitation application	8	9	0	0	0	0
Expenses related to PR, office, business meetings etc.	3	3	7	3	3	5
Expenses related to Religienet	0	18	8	4	2	3
<b>Balance viz. use of reserves</b>	<b>-28</b>	<b>-23</b>	<b>-5</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>-31</b>
<b>Reserves at the end of the year</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>49</b>