

Institute of Education and Child Studies, Leiden University

Response to the Report on the research review of Pedagogical Sciences and Educational Sciences 2012-2017

We are grateful to the committee for its thorough and positive evaluation of research in pedagogical and educational sciences in the Netherlands and, specifically, our institute's research program. We highly appreciate the compliments and valuable feedback that we received. We enjoyed the site visit and the stimulating discussions with the committee. The committee has reviewed our work according to the latest Standard Evaluation Protocol, focusing on research quality, relevance to society, and viability, as well as on PhD training, our policy with respect to research integrity, and diversity.

Seven research programs were assessed within the Netherlands. The committee clearly noted considerable strength and resilience of these programs and recognized the existence of rich collaborative research networks at a national level. Furthermore, the committee expressed that they were particularly impressed by the doctoral candidates interviewed – who were described as being *“universally enthusiastic, ambitious, confident, and committed to producing high quality and relevant research”* – and noted that all local arrangements for PhD students were fully satisfactory. The committee also regarded the institutes' *“attention to the practical implications of their work (the so-called valorisation dimension), while at the same time achieving success in meeting or exceeding targets for quality and quantity of scholarly output”* as striking and admirable. Finally, the committee recognized the fact that the research programs under review were not dependent on single sources of funding, but were supported by national grants, European funding, as well as contract work.

General challenges were also noted. These included the volatility of the research funding base, declining student numbers, growth in the use of temporary contracts for junior faculty members, and the lack of a clearly articulated strategy concerning public engagement.

Specifically regarding our institute, the committee recognized that the timing of the evaluation was challenging considering the recent major changes the institute underwent. The institute has experienced a time of transition and we are now in the middle of looking forward and redefining our strengths. Even though a research visitation during a phase in which a new research mission and strategy for the future are still being developed is indeed challenging, we regard it as an important opportunity to further define the focus of our future directions .

Our research quality was evaluated as excellent. The committee mentioned that the *“productivity and the high quality of research output have been undoubted strengths of the Institute during the assessment period”* and mentioned our highly cited journal articles and notable successes in obtaining external funding, including four NWO grants, an ERC consolidator grant, and an FP-7 ICT grant. We are pleased that our continued efforts to conduct high-quality research have paid off and are being recognized.

The committee praised the societal relevance of our research and evaluated it as very good. The committee noted that *“the Institute clearly produces research that has societal relevance, and the self-evaluation document showcased the collaboration with clinicians via the TRIXY Expertise Center, as well as the development of intervention materials for promoting positive parenting and supporting children's reading.”* The committee also suggested that *“more information on the ways in which this research has informed professional practice”* would have been helpful for evaluating the relevance of our research for society.

Regarding viability, we appreciate the committee's recognition of a successful transcendence of the difficult period that lies behind us. The committee rated our viability as good. They noted a number of challenges for the near future and provided valuable recommendations, to which we will respond below. They also mentioned that *"a board consisting of only two people is a vulnerability, and somewhat at odds with the Institute's goal of fostering greater staff involvement and collaboration."* However, the Management Team, which now meets every two weeks and includes all six program-group chairs in addition to the Institute Board, is an essential organizational structure in the institute. The position of program-group chair is an important one and ensures that staff are broadly involved in decisions and processes within the institute.

The committee also described a number of strengths regarding our institute's viability: *"the presence of senior and highly productive researchers, who have demonstrated their capacity to be productive in research, to compete successfully for funding, and to collaborate with research leaders from abroad; the commitment of ongoing support and opportunities for new appointments from the Dean; the palpable sense among the staff that a new culture of collaboration and mutual support has been initiated."* We are pleased that our efforts in these directions and the support we receive from the Dean are being recognized and that these strengths *"led the evaluation committee to considerable optimism about the ultimate viability of the Institute"*.

The committee has given several recommendations throughout their report to which we respond below.

Recommendation 1: Research focus.

Monitor various areas that are critical to achieving excellence in research quality and define what makes the Leiden Institute and its research unique.

We are currently working on a new mission statement and strategy for the institute. To do so, we have asked the Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS) in our faculty to perform an analysis on the positioning of our institute and the relative scientific and societal impact of our research in the different research areas in which we are actively involved. This analysis provides guidance in terms of research focus for the coming years in order to maintain and even improve the excellent quality of our research. In addition, this analysis provides input for better defining what makes our institute unique. Both the monitoring of critical research areas and the defining what makes us unique are part of the development of our new mission and strategy. We aim to finish this process in Fall 2019.

Recommendation 2: Research funding.

Put clear procedures in place to encourage and help every member of staff to apply regularly for research funding and set funding targets in order to help the Institute maintain its research reputation.

Our institute has a successful history regarding research funding. From the previous to the current evaluation period, the average yearly amount of external research funding showed a 19% increase whereas research staff ftes have increased with only 1%. To keep up this level, we regularly discuss funding opportunities with members of our scientific staff and set up small committees to help scientific staff prepare for grant proposals (e.g., practice grant interviews). Furthermore, scientific staff applying for large personal grants can receive a budget that they can use for support during the grant writing period. We will consider setting funding targets. We do think it is important to focus on a broad range of grants, from NWO and ERC to grants from non-profit organizations, and on grants for research that fits our research mission.

Recommendation 3: Societal relevance.

Mechanisms for capitalising on the potential real-world impact of research need to be fully embedded within all research areas. The Institute would thus benefit from establishing clear procedures for (a) exploiting the impact of its research beyond academia, (b) quantifying societal impact, and (c) considering how its research can be used to influence policy.

Relevance to society is an explicit part of our work that is also discussed during the yearly progress and evaluation meetings with our scientific staff. We fully agree with the committee that it is important to quantify the actual utility of the products of research meant to improve practice and thank the committee for their suggestions. We will invest in quantification of impact by strengthening the procedures already in place, and by establishing new ones where needed. The CWTS analysis on scientific and societal impact (mentioned above) already provided valuable information to this end. For example, it showed that publications in the research areas in which we are active are mentioned in policy reports more than twice as often as is the case in other research areas. This shows that our type of research is highly connected to society from a policy perspective.

Recommendation 4: Appointing new staff

The review committee fully supports the management's goal of focusing less on h-index and appointing new staff on the basis of how well they will fit into the newly developed research areas. This strategy could build the foundation for a much stronger Institute in the long run. The major short term challenge will be to maintain productivity and research quality while honouring this goal.

We are pleased to see that the committee supports *“our goal of focusing less on h-index and appointing new staff on the basis of how well they will fit into the newly developed research areas”*. We would like to note that we not only select (and consider offering a permanent contract to) staff on the basis of the fit with our research areas, but are also working, in collaboration with our faculty, on a new way to evaluate research excellence. This way of evaluating steers away from a strong focus on quantitative indicators such as the h-index. We believe that developing a revised vision on excellence will be a strong basis for maintaining research quality in the future.

Recommendation 5: Workload.

Staff raised concerns about workload and the low percentage of time allocated to research. This needs to be addressed in an equitable fashion to support and nurture early career researchers.

We certainly recognize these concerns, which apply to Dutch academia as a whole. Although some of the processes that contribute to an increased workload are outside our scope of influence, we are committed to address this issue in the coming years. One of the changes we would like to make is to increase our focus on team work and differentiation in tasks. This would mean that, depending on talent, interests, and achievements some team members will have an increased focus on research and will be evaluated as such, whereas others get more time for teaching, administration, or outreach, again with evaluations that match their task descriptions and always keeping in mind the connection between research and teaching. This is in line with policy that is currently being developed in our faculty and that fits national and local discussions and policy documents on changes in valuing and rewarding (*waarderen en belonen*) that can help strengthen our policy in this area.

Recommendation 6: Research methods and statistics.

Ensure that proper resources are provided for the research methods and statistics area.

Two steps have already been taken to ensure such resources. First, an assistant professor with expertise in this area has recently been given a permanent contract. Second, we urge researchers who apply for grants to allocate part of the budget to statistical support when this is advantageous to the project. In addition to the steps already taken, the Research Methods and Statistics program group will work on extending their expertise by supporting other researchers in the institute to become experts in certain areas and by maintaining a network of colleagues with specific expertise in the methods and statistics area. This guarantees a broader knowledge base and more flexibility in responding to requests for support or collaboration. Finally, the institute will reserve part of the budget to provide support in case of unexpected peaks in requests and to ensure that the methods and statistics group can continue their own research efforts in the area of methods and statistics.

Recommendation 7: Strategy.

It is critically important that the management team has a viable strategy which it can communicate successfully to the Institute's researchers. To this end, more attention needs to be given to the actual processes and procedures that the Institute can put in place in order to achieve its goals. According to the committee the Institute is working hard on moving forward and important steps are taken.

We fully agree with this suggestion and are currently working on a new research mission and strategy. We not only feel that this strategy should be communicated successfully to our colleagues, but also think it is of utmost importance that the researchers in the institute are actively involved in developing this mission and strategy. To this end we have organized a 'strategy' day where a representation of our scientific staff were present (from PhD students to program-group chairs and full professors). The mission and strategy will be further developed in the coming months, with active involvement of staff. We are confident that we are at a point where we can really move forward and focus fully on making a difference in terms of our research impact.

Recommendation 8: PhD students

Improve duration and completion rates, provide more information and guidance on career planning, and stimulate more integration of PhD students across the research areas.

Although we already monitor the progress of our PhD students during yearly evaluation meetings, we are in the process of developing and implementing a more systematic PhD monitoring system. We do this in collaboration with our PhD coordinator and with other institutes in the Faculty of Social Sciences. Career planning is part of the yearly evaluation interviews, but is often mainly discussed in the final years of the PhD program. We will make sure that it will be formally incorporated in all stages of the program. Finally, the Scientific Director meets with the PhD students twice a year; in these meetings matters such as integration across research areas are discussed. Recently several PhD students have taken the initiative to organize formal and informal meetings for all PhD students of the institute to stimulate integration – an initiative strongly supported by the Institute. Furthermore, we organize about eight institute-wide meetings a year, focused on research or teaching, in which colleagues from all research areas meet.

Recommendation 9: Diversity

Make strategic decisions to attract a more diverse pool of applicants for Faculty posts.

We appreciate the committee's compliments on our efforts to increase student diversity. We have particularly put energy into student recruitment, focusing on the broad areas of interest that are covered by Education and Child Studies, involving ethnically diverse (clinical as well as normative) populations across a wide age range, and including subjects related to beta sciences. Hopefully, these efforts will positively affect student diversity, which in time will translate to more diversity in applicants for staff positions. We like to note that currently, our staff is already more diverse than our student population, particularly regarding gender. In our hiring policies, diversity in the broad sense (not only regarding gender and ethnicity, but also with respect to personality, interests, and talents) will be an important focus. However, specifically in the current phase of redefining our research strategies, the added value of an applicant to the scope and quality of our research program will remain the deciding factor.

We thank the committee for its valuable feedback and for the opportunity to respond to the evaluation report. We are convinced that the recommendations and our actions will further strengthen the research program in our institute in the near future.

On behalf of the Institute of Education and Child Studies,
Lenneke Alink, scientific director