

# Strategy Evaluation

## Theologische Universiteit Utrecht

Independent External Evaluation

April 2024



## Introduction

The *Theologische Universiteit Utrecht* (TUU) has requested the committee to assess the academic research conducted at their university in the years 2018-2023, and to offer recommendations to improve its quality and strategy. It was asked to judge the performance of the institution and its three research units on the SEP assessment criteria: 1) research quality, 2) relevance to society, and 3) viability. Furthermore, the TUU asked the committee to advice on three areas: profiling of TUU, position of TUU and TUU's addressing of weaknesses.

The chair of the committee was Prof. Peter Nissen, and it was further made up of Prof. Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer and Prof. Joris Geldhof. Gertjan Schuiling assisted the committee as secretary. This report is based on a close reading of the Self Evaluation Report TUU 8th February 2024 and its 5 appendices and on a site visit at the TUU on March 27-28, 2024.

## TUU overall

### *Profiling TUU*

The concentration of research in three programs gives TUU's research a distinct face within the academic field. Two of the three programs have a recognizable profile of their own. The BEST program still lacks its own sharp profile; it is a rather classical combination of some theological disciplines, without a distinctive thematic profile. The profiling of BEST deserves elaboration in the next period.

Classical craftsmanship in the theological disciplines (systematic theology, ethics, biblical exegesis, historical theology, practical theology) is also attended to. In the collaboration with the other two theological institutions in Utrecht, TST and PThU, these craft communities can be stimulated further.

It is a challenging question what the unique selling point of TUU in these growing collaborations will be. The vision on TUU's own identity proved not to be unequivocal in the senate. But identity can be discovered in the collaboration. The tradition of faith as an essential and productive element in theological reflection brings a lot of wisdom that helps in enriching the scholarly debate and in focussing on practice.

The profiling of research is rather limited. The external communication is focussed on the research of professors. No attention is paid to the research of junior staff, (in- or external) PhD's and aio's.

### *Position TUU*

With its research, TUU adds a clear sound of its own to the theological discourse, both in the Netherlands and internationally. The move to Utrecht offers opportunities for cooperation with related institutions there (PThU, UvH, UU, location Utrecht of the TST), for example in research seminars, conferences and library use.

The churches contribute a quarter of TUU's finances. So, they are an important connection for TUU's societal position.

The library with its 3.5 kilometres of books will move to Utrecht in the definite building. The aim is to make the collection as valuable as possible in relation to what other libraries in Utrecht already have to offer.

### *Addressing weaknesses*

The size in FTEs and students continues to make TUU vulnerable, as does the relatively small church constituency.

The new joint concentration on the theme of Vulnerability and Hope is promising, especially given the tremendous growth of the theology of vulnerability in the last decade (including in the German and English language regions).

Installing a research director and a grants officer helps to support university-wide research meetings and a stronger communication to the outside world of funding. The committee observes that pleasure is experienced in creating transversalities together.

Talent development is first of all designed as a tenure track. There is however only space for a tenure track when a professor plans his retirement. That's why the board pays attention to talent in the classroom, giving a push here and there and promoting an NWO-project or looking externally to talent development opportunities at other universities.

### *PhD programs*

With an average of 4 PhDs per year, TUU is not doing much worse than other theological faculties. Possibly in the medium term, cooperation with the PThU offers opportunities for economies of scale.

The participation of PhD students and young researchers in networks such as NOSTER is actively promoted.

PhD students are supervised one-on-one every month and participate in the two-monthly research meetings of the units.

The committee had a conversation with four PhD-students:

- Annemiek de Jonge, defended her thesis in 2022. She was an external PhD-student in the research unit CCMW. She now works as program leader Serving and Identity ('Dienstverlening en Identiteit') in the research unit Care and Meaning ('Zorg en Zingeving') at Viaa in Zwolle.
- Kasper de Graaf, PhD-student employed by TUU, research unit BEST.
- Lois Oosterhof- van Bruggen, PhD-student employed by TUU, research unit NRI.
- Lambert Pasterkamp, PhD-student employed by TUU, research unit NRI, joint project of TUU and CHE (Ede), where he is also a lecturer in sociology.

They all feel the infrastructure for their research is well organized, for instance access to the library of University Utrecht. They also feel encouraged to attend conferences.

The committee supports their advises to TUU:

- Appoint female professors, that would provide a role model for female PhD-students.
- Stimulate more contacts between PhD-students.
- Keep in contact with students after their doctorate. After several years of lively conversations with their promotors suddenly all academic conversation stops after the defence of their dissertation.
- Explore together with the PhD-students their needs for a broader academic education. Some students would have welcomed a broader introduction into disciplines and fields such as church history, ethics and philosophy while others experienced gaps in knowledge about empirical research after their doctorate in the collaboration with empirically trained scholars. TUU does not need to provide the courses themselves.
- Involve PhD-students in TUU's publication policy. Stimulate students to publish English papers during their dissertation work, not afterwards.

#### *Integrity of research*

Data management is a paragraph in every research proposal. The librarian supports data management. CCMW is the only group that creates new data in doing empirical research.

#### *Diversity, safety and inclusivity*

In terms of gender diversity TUU is actively working to increase the number of women on the institution's academic staff, which has traditionally been a strongly male-dominated institution. Female/male students is now 50-50 and one female professor is appointed and one in progress. This will change only slowly as only a retiring professor creates room for new appointments. The board is aware that women are confronted with prejudice and sexism and have trouble in being a woman in a carefree way in a world and history of men, and the board is also aware of the necessity of creating conditions for safe conversations. The policy is to appoint more women in aio-positions; not to have one-on-one meetings between a promotor and female PhD-student; no panels without a woman; and start a research project 'woman in Christian theology'.

There is little policy on race diversity as the affiliated churches have no broad connection with migrant communities.

### **Biblical Exegesis and Systematic Theology (BEST)**

In the evaluation period this is the only research group that after the failure of the merger decided to continue the cooperation between TUU and TUA. The group combines TUU and TUA researchers who have a research meeting four times a year and a yearly meeting that is also attended by the external PhD-students.

### ***Research quality***

BEST counts several prominent researchers, who play a significant role in theological discourse nationally and internationally. BEST's objective seems to be the promotion of interaction between biblical studies and systematic theology and the development of a methodology for it. The thematic focus 'God's discriminating love' seems to be secondary to this. The program is a collection of individual research projects by members. Conferences were planned in 2018, 2020 (postponed to 2021 by COVID) and 2022 (not taken place), but the conference proceedings of the conferences that did take place have yet to appear now (2024).

A real publishing strategy seems to be lacking. Publication work is focused on three international conferences each resulting in a volume. The first volume is a collection of individual papers, the next two volumes will be more coherent with help of guiding themes and a paper on the methodology of interdisciplinary collaboration. The collaboration of biblical scholarship and systematic theology is seen as necessary as the single disciplines do not deliver enough satisfying results. Biblical scholarship refreshes systematic theology, and the latter helps the former to pose the question of God.

Both disciplines have their own requirements. For aio's it is not possible to comply to both within four years. The way forward is to have two aio's of different disciplines working on the same theme and have them supervised by two professors of different disciplines. These four are working as one research team.

The group suffered a loss with the move of Prof. dr. A. Huijgen to the PThU. From that moment onwards, the group is chaired by Prof. dr. Hans Burger who is continuing the earlier chosen direction without a concrete sense of where the group wants to stand in the next six years' time. The group is looking for a clear direction in the international academic world.

The combination of exegetes and systematic theologians within a single research institute is not that unique. Biblical scholarship and systematic theology have been linked from the birth of Christian theology. They later grew apart due to the increasing disciplinary specialization of the subjects. Attempts to bring the two back together have been around at least since the middle of the last century.

### ***Societal relevance***

BEST seems to deal mainly with themes that concern its own church constituency. Publications by members of the research group clearly have meaning and impact for workers in pastoral and church practice, especially pastors. Contemporary media, such as a Theologian's blog, are also used for this purpose. The group's reach thus seems mainly limited to its own church constituency. BEST researchers appear to act little in the wider social field. The group wants to focus more on publication in secular contexts and on cooperation with non-theologians. It is however not clear which social questions in those contexts they are thinking of and how they intend to appeal to non-theologians with the theme of Suffering and Sacrifice.

### ***Viability***

Obtaining grants is a problem that all theological research groups must contend with; it is not specific to BEST, nor is the discouragement caused by the lack of success in making applications. Especially given the relevance of BEST's research to church practice, the possibility of tapping church funds for theological PhD research could be explored.

The committee advises this research group to rethink whether TUU and TUA's collaboration in BEST needs to be continued, and if so what the direction of research could be. The thematic focus seems little developed (Crucial Commitment, but also Suffering and Sacrifice).

### **Centre for Church and Mission in the West (CCMW)**

This research unit is a collaboration of practical theologians, missiologists, and church law experts. It was newly formed after the failure of the merger with TUA as a much smaller yet more coherent research group than its precursor Reformed Traditions in Secular Europe. Its mission is to contribute through high-quality research to the sustainable innovation of the church and its mission in the secularizing parts of the world. It was first chaired by Prof. dr. Stefan Paas and is now chaired by Prof. dr. Hans Schaeffer. The unit defines itself as a hub. The unit collaborates with two visiting fellows of Christian University of Applied Sciences (CHE) which gives synergy in the two branches of Dutch higher education: academic and applied sciences.

### ***Research quality***

CCMW has a strong programmatic focus, expressed in the title of the program, and elaborated in the questioning of salvation in a secularized context. The focus on 'lived soteriology' gives the program its own face nationally and internationally and a challenging role in theology. With Stefan Paas, CCMW features one of today's most important theological voices in the Netherlands. His book *Vrede op aarde* is an excellent calling card for CCMW's research. Several members of CCMW are active in international journals and book series.

The unit is remarkably agile in the conceptual dimension. Exploring the theme of salvation with practitioners it transformed this theme into peacemaking as a relational translation of salvation. The community is essential for salvation, so the vertical and horizontal dimensions really need to be connected. The unit also quickly picked up the new TUU-wide theme of Vulnerability and Hope and is in the process of thinking it through academically on an empirical basis by doing research in and with practices among groups of people sharing experiences of vulnerability. The focus on the 'how?'-question seems to help this conceptual agility when observing and exploring practice. This how-question was found in the network ecclesiology and is strengthened by the empirical approach of the two visiting fellows of CHE.

### ***Societal relevance***

CCMW has two research projects working with people in communities that have vertical and horizontal connections. One explores the stories of hope of prostitutes, with the aim of finding their power in vulnerability (resilience). The other explores networks around people with a mental disability with the aim to live together based on reciprocity instead of a care paradigm. The Christian tradition has a lot to offer for both types of communities and the unit explores how to research this in collaboration with them. This results for instance in the Friendship Building in which students live together with people with a disability. In Holland in Michigan a Hebrew course has been designed together with mentally disabled people. This disrupts the paradigm of inclusivity with its high-low orientation.

Through Stefan Paas' books, podcasts and appearance as Theologian Laureate (Theoloog des Vaderlands), CCMW is an important voice in the public debate on religion in society.

### ***Viability***

The program is perhaps too dependent on one person in its social relevance. It should be promoted that other researchers also have a stronger presence in the wider debate.

CCMW has a strong starting position for the coming years. Academic Nachwuchs is well underway. The heavy workload of the small staff is a threat. Ensuring sufficient research time has to be a priority in the coming time.

## **Neo-Calvinism Research Institute (NRI)**

### ***Research quality***

As an academic center of expertise on Neo-Calvinism, NRI has a strong profile and an international position, especially given the demise of some similar centers in the USA. It publishes internationally at a high-quality level. The center has tripled its members and doubled its research capacity from 3.3 fte to 6.7 fte while 13 PhDs have been achieved. Ample external research funding has been acquired. About 25 conferences have been organized. NRI is clearly gaining momentum. It makes good use of modern digital resources, both for accessing sources and for holding international conferences. Of the three programs, NRI seems to be the most successful in interdisciplinarity.

It is chaired by Prof. dr. George Harinck. The committee experiences the self-evaluation report as highly self-critical, focusing on problems and not expressing the inspirational core.

For instance, the inclusion of the two institutes CDRS and E-OI is said not to work well: CDRS is too small with 4-5 researchers and E-OI is an important letterbox to the outside world but should be positioned elsewhere.

The committee believes ugly structures can work well if one has a biting narrative. In the conversation the narrative of Neo-Calvinism emerges as an inspirational strength. Neo-Calvinism is a Dutch tradition



that arises at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While in the early days the Dutch exported Neo-Calvinism, nowadays NRI is being asked as the center of expertise and passes on the tradition. Internationally the interest is growing. Many Dutch texts are translated in other languages, PhD-students come to NRI to write their dissertation. The main theme of their interest is diversity of gender and race. Neo-Calvinism has a strong argumentation that one should not strive to stamp a society by one's own religion. Religion is a right for all, every religion on an equal footing. Freedom of conscience is an important value: there should be no coercion in religion. This makes Neo-Calvinism very topical for societies all over the world today.

Interdisciplinarity is another issue that NRI is very self-critical about. It works, they say, but is object of many discussions, a next level has not yet been realized. The committee is however impressed by the seriousness with which this issue is dealt with. The diagnostic category that NRI uses is language confusion: philosophers and theologians do not understand each other, while historians and theologians also have their tensions. Theologians used to administer the language field, but they do not understand the post-modern questions of philosophers about the same subject and historians often find the theologians too normative. The research domain of Neo-Calvinism needs all three disciplines. The strategy that NRI designed is to develop a shared language field. A group has been formed and tasked to fill the two key terms of the TUU-wide theme of Vulnerability and Hope. In two months, they will deliver a first description of a collaborative language field.

### ***Societal relevance***

The publication policy is focused on societal issues. The consequence is that NRI attracts many PhD-students and distributes them over the three institutes. At this moment George Harinck does the distribution, and in a few years, this will be done by his successor. The transfer of the international network of relations is key. Another consequence is the access to funds in the United States. This is used to build communities in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Conferences are organized locally, in which NRI participates. The intention is to collaborate with Fuller Seminary to become one group of academic communities.

The publication requirement of TUU is that every researcher writes one peer-reviewed paper each year. The requirement in NRI is higher as the size of the group offers more opportunities to work together.

Members of NRI are prominent in the media, including participation in an English-language podcast (by one of its members).

### ***Viability***

The starting position is good, nationally and internationally. As with its scientific output, NRI's social relevance seems to depend heavily on a few individuals. This makes it vulnerable.

Staff rejuvenation and expansion of permanent research time are points of attention. Now much depends on a few, busy researchers (the program leader is also rector of TUU!).

The institute E-OI is highly relevant but does not fit under this umbrella of NRI. We recommend to explore which network is more helping for this group to come into its own, be visible and flourish.

## Conclusion

The committee compliments TUU for its extremely hospitable reception, for the honesty with which each spoke with us. We met no window-dressing, but enthusiastic and competent researchers. TUU could have shown this enthusiasm more clearly in the Self Evaluation Report. The committee only discovered it during the talks. Be proud of what you do and show it on your website.

The committee also compliments TUU for its considerable development in research policy. The theme Vulnerability and Hope gives a promising thematic profile.

Research quality is good and solid. If TUU would aim for the qualification 'excellent' in the years to come on the V&H research theme, then quality improvement is needed and resources and researchers that have a potential for excellent research need to be stimulated. TUU is small, but a Calimero-attitude is not appropriate. Your collaboration is what makes you unique, don't be too modest about that. We saw the sparkle in all of you and assure you that this is really inviting to go along with you.

- BEST is relevant for church congregations, but it seems difficult to acquire resources in this field.
- CCMW has a practice focus in the Dutch context, which gives more opportunities for alliances to 2nd and 3rd money stream. It is important that its theological profile remains clear: in practice and stories you want to recognize God in vulnerable people in society such as prostitutes and the mentally disabled and bring knowledge back to communities, to pastors you train here and to theology and the friendship house.
- NRI offers more opportunities in the international field, Neo-Calvinism is relevant for political social questions around the world (freedom of religion and freedom of conscience) and has the best potential for international collaboration.

The tensions between the disciplines are perceived as a burden, we read many sighs in your evaluation report. But what a challenge and a blessing it is to let the conversation between the descriptive and the normative become fruitful. Discussing this with the researchers the committee saw the sparkle emerge.

In profiling TUU made a good step in organizing three research institutes, and a promising next step will be the concentration on one V&H theme. Researchers, also PhD students, should make this commonality their own without it being a straitjacket. The team of researchers should find language to articulate what the profile of the institution is.

On the point of positioning: Search for collaboration as well as define your identity from your crafts and beliefs. The theme of hope lends itself well to this. Hope (with faith and love) is a theological virtue. We support your courage to position TUU as a genuine theological university.

Furthermore:

- Leave the structure as it is, continue with the three research units as letterboxes to the outside world and as a grouping of the research staff.
- Attend to the interaction between the research units. BEST could be the conceptual nourishment, CCMW has made valuable progress in combining the normative and the empirical and NRI brings in PhD students internationally. Not everyone has to be equally good at everything.
- Support BEST to develop a clearer profile. BEST is serving TUU and TUA as two lords which takes a lot of energy and what do you get in return?
- TUU is active in the world of welfare and health, search for collaboration there with other disciplines such as health sciences, ZonMW, and social funds.
- Improvement is possible in the practices of supervising PhD students. A broad academic education and knowledge of methodology in empirical research need to be strengthened, even if not in-house.
- Bring more line in your external communication. The website, the Self Evaluation Report and the conversations sometimes tell different stories: 7 chairs versus three programs versus one common theme.
- Provide a chart of the organizational structure which explains the position of the research director.
- Stimulate PhD students to publish internationally during their PhD trajectory, not only afterwards.

## Appendix 1: program site visit at TUU Utrecht, 27-28 March 2024

Day 1 Wednesday 27 March

12.00 Getting to know each other and lunch

13.00 Internal deliberation committee

14.30 Break

14.45 Conversation with programme leader Burger

15.45 Pause

16.00 Conversation with programme leader Schäffer

17.00 Internal deliberation committee

18.00 Dinner

Day 2 Thursday 28 March

09.00 Conversation with Executive Board

10.00 Break

10.15 Conversation with programme leader Harinck

11.15 Break

11.30 Interview with 4 PhD students

12.30 Lunch

13.15 Internal deliberation

15.00 Oral report to all concerned

15.30 Departure committee

## Appendix 2: Short biographies of the committee members

Peter Nissen is Professor Emeritus of Ecumenical Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology, and Religious Studies of Radboud University in Nijmegen (The Netherlands). He studied theology and church history in Nijmegen and defended his PhD thesis in Amsterdam on 'Catholic polemics against Anabaptism in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in 1988'. Previous he has held the chairs of Church history, Cultural history of Religion and Spirituality Studies at Radboud University and that of Cultural history of Christianity at Tilburg University. He has been Dean of the Faculty of Theology and President of NOSTER, the Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion. His main fields of research are the history of popular religion, religion and culture, present-day forms of spirituality, Reformation history, the history of spirituality and monasticism, and ecumenism in past and present. He has been on the editorial board of a number of academic journals and series and edited a number of scholarly volumes.

Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer is Professor of Religious Education at Tilburg University (TST), with national and international network on Youth Ministry and Religious Education. She is a member of the Executive Board of IASYM, the conference committee of Religious Education Association, founding member of Levensbeschouwing en Religie in Voortgezet Onderwijs (Lervo) and editor of 'Handboek Vakdidactiek, Levensbeschouwing en Religie'. She was vice-dean of Education at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology and coordinator of the Teacher Academy there. Studied Sociology and Psychology at Leiden University and did her PhD at Erasmus University. She is pastoral supervisor and director of 'Zin voor Zin'.

Joris Geldhof is Professor of Liturgical Studies and Sacramental Theology at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, Belgium. He is Vice-Dean for Research and belongs to the Research Unit Pastoral and Empirical Theology. He also chairs the Liturgical Institute. In the latter capacity he is also the editor-in-chief of the bilingual journal *Questions Liturgiques*. His major areas of interest and expertise are liturgical theology, the Eucharist, and questions pertaining to Christian sacramentality in contemporary cultures. Among other works he edited *Mediating Mysteries, Understanding Liturgies: On Bridging the Gap Between Liturgy and Systematic Theology* (Leuven: Peeters, 2015) and, together with Marianne Moyaert, *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries – Transgressions – Innovations* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015). He is the author of *Liturgy and Secularism: Beyond the Divide* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2018), *Liturgical Theology as a Research Program* (Leiden - Boston: Brill), and *Monotheism in Christian Liturgy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). Joris served as President of *Societas Liturgica* for a term of two years between 2017 and 2019.

Gertjan Schuiling is program director executive education in action research at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. In 2007-2010 he was professor Learning in Changing Organizations at the Hogeschool van Arnhem en Nijmegen. He is also an independent consultant in organization development with experience in industry and in higher education. He acted as secretary of this committee.