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**Statement Executive Board  
regarding the research review of Political Science**

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Subject: Statement Executive Board regarding the research review of Political Science

The Executive Board of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam has received and considered the final report of the research evaluation of the research programme Multi-Layered Governance (MLG) covering the period 2013-2019. This assessment was conducted in the context of the Standard Evaluation Protocol (SEP) 2015-2021. A self-evaluation report written by the research unit, together with interviews by a peer review committee carried out in December 2020, formed the basis of the assessment.

The Executive Board appreciates the careful assessment by the committee and is pleased that the scientific quality and societal relevance of the programme are both assessed as excellent. The committee assessed the viability as 'good', meaning that MLG makes responsible strategic decisions and is therefore well equipped for the future. The committee was positive about the policies in place to ensure research integrity and found the PhD programme of high quality, with a good completion and placement record.

Recommendations were also made by the committee, they can be found in the published report. Among these are:

- Do more to integrate the research of the integrated departments of Political Science and Public Administration;
- Develop a career track policy beyond the level of assistant professor to provide junior staff with clearer prospects for their further advancement within the VU;
- Try to create a larger PhD candidate cohort and more coherent PhD candidate community;
- Intensify efforts to increase the diversity of staff beyond gender and national diversity to reflect the growing levels of diversity in the student body, and in Dutch society.

The report and recommendations, together with a written response by the department, have recently been discussed in a meeting of the Executive Board with the faculty. The department takes the recommendations and conclusions to heart and describes in the appendix how it will make, or already has made, improvements. The Executive Board supports this approach in further enhancing the quality and relevance of the research.

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Finally, the Executive Board of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam wishes to express its gratitude to the review committee for the considerable time and effort invested in this assessment and to the department for the diligent preparation of this evaluation.

Yours sincerely,  
On behalf of the Executive Board



prof. dr. Mirjam van Praag,  
president and rector magnificus a.i.

Enclosure: Response letter department

## Response letter on Research Review VU Political Science (MLG)

On behalf of the department's Management Team,  
Patrick Overeem (research manager), [p.overeem@vu.nl](mailto:p.overeem@vu.nl)

### Overall conclusion

The committee is very laudatory about the MLG research programme, both in terms of research quality and societal relevance (both scored 1, meaning "The research unit has been shown to be one of the few most influential research groups in the world in its particular field"; and: "The research unit makes an outstanding contribution to society"). This appraisal is obviously highly welcome to us. In terms of program viability, the committee has its concerns (score 3; "The research unit makes responsible strategic decisions and is therefore well equipped for the future") and calls for continued and increased investments by the Department, the Faculty, and the University. We consider this a clear encouragement to proceed with regards to the substance of our program and a call to step up with regards to its conditions.

The committee provided four main recommendations. To quote them fully:

1. "First, the merged Departments of Political Science and Public Administration are advised to do more to integrate their research and develop substantive collaboration so that scale benefits are not limited to financial consolidation and the alleviation of managerial burdens but extend to a common research program.
2. Second, and in addition to the ongoing overhaul of tenure-track regulations and requirements, the committee recommends developing a career track policy beyond the level of assistant professor to provide junior staff with clearer prospects for their further advancement within the VU. Moreover, the MLG programme should consider additional formal support structures such as low-level seed and research funding.
3. Third, the MLG programme should expand the number of internal PhD candidates in order to create a larger and more coherent PhD community. Given the decline in base funding, and that grants for junior staff do not fund (many) PhD candidates, this objective requires senior staff to increase their efforts to win research grants. If the MLG group achieves the aim of larger PhD cohort, it should also take measures to institutionalize the PhD programme further.
4. Finally, the committee recommends that the MLG programme intensify its efforts to increase the diversity of its staff beyond gender and national diversity." (pp. 17-18)

In this response letter, we present and address the most important points of the committee in the order in which they are raised in the report. We will highlight which measures we have already taken and which we will take in order to meet the four recommendations and other points raised.

### 1. Research quality and societal relevance

#### *Positive observations*

The committee makes several positive observations:

- "...members of the programme have been highly influential in defining the MLG agenda in the discipline. The research programme has continued to produce high-quality contributions to research in the review period" (p.14).

- “Overall, the programme has achieved an impressive balance of output of primarily scientific and primarily societal relevance” (p.15).
- “The committee appreciates the strategic choices of the MLG group to complete the current transition period and to maintain or regain its research capacity and research quality. The strategy is bearing fruit and the committee generally recommends continuing on the current path” (p.17).
- Thematically, and with regard to its societal impact, the MLG research programme seems well positioned for the future.

#### *More critical comments*

The committee also makes a more critical comment:

- “The programme has lost some of its most senior and internationally renowned and visible members. These scholars contributed disproportionately to the research funding of the group. By the end of the review period, the department had not been able to compensate fully these losses in research capacity either quantitatively or qualitatively” (p.14).

#### *Recommendations*

The committee offers the following recommendations:

- “Given the obvious thematic affinities between multi-layered governance and public administration, *more could be done to integrate* public administration research with the MLG programme and to create synergies through *common hires and projects*” (p.14).
- “The merged Departments of Political Science and Public Administration are advised to *do more to integrate their research and develop substantive collaboration* so that scale benefits are not limited to financial consolidation and the alleviation of managerial burdens but extend to a common research program” (p.17). (Recommendation #1)

#### **Our response**

In response to these observations, comments, and recommendations, we want to note the following:

- We are pleased with the committee’s observations that MLG has a relevant research focus. The committee correctly observes that the program has partly or entirely lost some of its most visible and productive members and that we have not yet been able to replace them with colleagues of similar academic and acquisition strength. At the same time, the committee observes that we are well underway regaining research strength, making new investments in staff and topics.
- We agree with the committee that closer collaboration between political science (PS) and public administration (PA) in our Department can lead to substantive as well as organizational synergies and benefits. The two programs are complementary and can strengthen each other in various ways, e.g.,
  - 1) Methodologically: roughly speaking, PS is particularly strong in quantitative and (quasi-) experimental methods and PA more in qualitative and participatory methods;
  - 2) Qua level: PS focuses mainly on international and European governance, while PA concentrates on (sub)national and local governance;
  - 3) Qua styles of research: PS is particularly strong in fundamental research (often hypothetico-deductive and normative/theoretical) and PA in contract research (including action research).

In each of these three respects, cross-fertilization and cooperation will be further stimulated. This is further enabled by thematic overlaps, particularly in the fields of security, algorithmic governance, and integrity/ethics, in which PS/PA cooperation already does take place, e.g., in PhD-supervision and co-authorships.
- A logical next step suggested by the committee (p.13) is to see whether some PA colleagues could participate in the MLG research program (and vice versa some PS colleagues in the NPG research program). That is a very natural and promising way to strengthen cooperation. Another practical suggestion is to work on common hires and projects (including PhD projects/supervision). We welcome this suggestion and are already applying it in some recent hires of TT assistant professors and of the new professor in PA.

- The committee further recommends to work towards one research program. This is indeed also our aim. We will take steps to further integrate and, in the end, merge the MLG and NPG programs into one strong research program. The integrated program we aim at will preserve and combine the strengths of the current two programs while breaking new ground. Currently we explore a transition from separate disciplinary visitations to an integrated ISR visitation in the future.
- Finally, the committee praises the role of MLG staff in various “interdisciplinary networks and units beyond the Department” (p.13). We deliberately aim at a T-profile of our researchers, meaning that they have to develop a deep disciplinary grounding and, on that basis, become involved in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work as well. Junior colleagues will be actively stimulated to develop such a profile and be assisted in navigating their way through the sometimes complex institutional landscape. Senior staff continuously investigates fruitful possibilities for research cooperation (not least with other department and faculties at the VU and with sister departments at other universities). Furthermore, MLG’s participation in the Faculty’s ISR will be further strengthened.

## 2. Viability

### *Positive observations*

The committee makes some positive observations:

- The overall judgement of the committee on the viability of the research programme is positive because “the research unit makes responsible strategic decisions and is therefore well equipped for the future” (score 3).
- The committee points out that we have made a successful generational change and have high institutional stability. “So far, the leadership seems to have done a good job of navigating the programme through some rocky waters. It has managed to address some of the primary challenges in ways that has also allowed the unit to rebuild, recruit new staff, secure additional grants, and maintain its emphasis on world-leading research” (p.15).

### *More critical comments*

The committee makes one critical comment:

- the MLG research programme “has been and is still going through a turbulent transition” (p.15).

### *Recommendations*

The committee provides the following recommendations:

- *Grant successes* at the junior level “need to be mirrored (...) *at the senior staff level* to compensate for the loss in research funding and the shrinking number of (standard) PhD students in the review period” (p.15).
- Junior staff have indicated they miss:
  - formal support structures, e.g., competitive seed money or funding of small-scale research,
  - research colloquia (which should not have to be organized by junior staff themselves) and
  - a clearer policy for promotion beyond the assistant professor level.
- Universities and faculties involved in the review should make a better financial effort to enable MLG to maintain its present high level: “Therefore, we advise the universities and faculties involved to *increase the basic funding for research* to an acceptable level and – as far as this is not the case already – to add an incentive for excellent research in their allocation model” (p.10).

## **Our response**

In response to these observations, comments, and recommendations, we want to note the following:

- The committee is right that MLG program has gone through a turbulent period and is currently attempting to find a new path to growth.

- We are currently developing a long-term departmental strategy for grant applications at all levels, including senior levels. A first step towards this strategy is the building of a dynamic research grant calendar that gives a clear overview of funding opportunities ('grant windows'), ongoing projects, and teaching responsibilities of our researchers. This calendar will serve as a tool in a broader strategy that should ultimately lead to tailor-made grant application pathways of our staff. To stimulate grant writing, MLG staff will be stimulated to make use of 'creative spaces' (writing retreats, application support, active coaching, etc.) provided by the Faculty. (Recommendation #3)
- We have a long tradition of research seminars (often lunch seminars), both at the departmental level and at the level of specific research groups. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this halted for a while (which explains why the point was raised), but we have now resumed our (online) series of monthly research seminars for all departmental staff. Besides these, specific sessions of research groups are organized by project leaders or supervising professors. And thirdly, junior staff (PhD students, junior lecturers) have taken the initiative to organize their own low-threshold and more informal seminar series – an initiative we applaud and which exists besides the other series.
- The points about seed money and promotion policy are addressed in section 3.

### 3. Personnel

#### *Recommendations*

The committee makes the following recommendations:

- "...we advise the universities not to stick rigidly to this traditional pyramid but – within limits - to widen the possibility for talented and successful scholars to be promoted to the higher ranks as part of an individual career pattern rather than having to wait for the possibility to apply for the next position becoming vacant" (p.10).
- "...in addition to the ongoing overhaul of tenure-track regulations and requirements, the committee recommends developing a *career track policy beyond the level of assistant professor* to provide junior staff with clearer prospects for their further advancement within the VU. Moreover, the MLG programme should consider *additional formal support structures* such as low-level seed and research funding" (p.18).

#### **Our response**

In response to this recommendation, we want to note the following:

- Last year, the Department has started with tenure-track positions that provide individual career paths for talented and promising colleagues. These positions provide promotion possibilities outside the 'traditional pyramid' via various trajectories outlined in the new FSS promotion policy (based on the VSNU's 'erkennen & waarden' principles). Several of these TT assistant professors have already been successful in acquiring research grants (one VENI and one large Swedish grant) as well as in publishing, doing media appearances, teaching, and launching new initiatives.
- A clear and cohesive career track policy, based on the VSNU's "recognition and rewarding" approach, is currently being developed by the University and the Faculty and will also be applied in our Department. This policy concerns all levels, not just assistant/associate/full professors, but also (junior) lecturers. In addition, we will also look specifically at career opportunities for PhD students, postdocs, and talented (research) master students. (Recommendation #2)
- Our Department has recently made a departmental call for seed money ("small research talent grants"), after which all seven submitted applications (ranging between €1.000 and €7.500, totalling an amount of €26.000) could be honored. Other initiatives (e.g., the organization of events) are also actively supported.

## 4. Diversity

### *More critical comments*

The committee makes the following critical comments:

- There is still an enduring gender gap at senior level in the MLG program.
- “The diversity of the academic staff in terms of ethnicity is still problematic” (p.12). And: “There is a notable absence [, however,] of ethnic and racial diversity amongst MLG staff, which stands in contrast to the diversity of the student body” (p.17).

### *Recommendations*

The committee offers the following recommendations:

- To make *new female hires at senior level* in the department.
- To intensify efforts to *increase the diversity of its staff beyond gender and national diversity*.
- To “take a closer look at its hiring and promotion strategies, to ensure that they are in line with Faculty and University level targets, with the aim of hiring, promoting and retaining staff that will reflect the growing levels of diversity in the student body, and in Dutch society as a whole” (p.17).

## **Our response**

In response to these recommendations, we want to note the following:

- The MLG and Department leadership recognizes the need of increasing gender and ethnic diversity amongst MLG staff. The Department closely follows University and Faculty policies to redress these imbalances and applies these also in its hiring policies. A beginning has been made in the recent hiring of five tenure-track assistant professors, four of whom were female. Increasing ethnic diversity and increasing various kinds of diversity at senior level will take more time and is partly dependent on future openings. We also aim to use designated financial sources for this purpose, like NWO' Impulsprogramme voor Inclusie in de Wetenschap (IWW) which includes, among others, new Mozaïek grants for PhDs. (Recommendation #4)

## 5. PhD programme

### *Observation*

The committee makes the following observation:

- “The small size of the PhD programme and funding pressures are clearly a concern, but there are strategies in place to grow the PhD programme by bringing in more research council grants, by nurturing talent within the existing MSc programmes, and by investing in international students with government scholarships” (p.16).

### *More critical comments*

The committee makes several critical comments:

- “High teaching loads for junior lecturers, financial pressures to accept externally-funded candidates, and additional adjustment times for those on foreign government scholarships, were all cited as issues that require close monitoring” (p.16).
- “...some aspects of the PhD programme may need to be more institutionalized at the Department level, especially strengthening opportunities for sharing and exchanging research beyond the immediate supervisory relationship” (p.17).

### *Recommendations*

The committee offers the following recommendations:

- “...we advise each of the Universities involved, to allocate at least a minimum number of PhD positions to the institutes involved. Also, where applicable, we advise them to give the institutes more leeway to use part of their own research budget for the funding of PhD positions” (p.11).

- To “expand the number of internal PhD candidates in order to create a larger and more coherent PhD community. Given the decline in base funding, and that grants for junior staff do not fund (many) PhD candidates, this objective requires senior staff to increase their efforts to win research grants. If the MLG group achieves the aim of larger PhD cohort, it should also take measures to institutionalize the PhD programme further” (p.18). (Recommendation #3)
- It is important that PhD candidates are admitted and trained in cohorts.

### **Our response**

In response to this observation, these comments, and these recommendations, we want to note the following:

- We recognize the need to expand our PhD program with both externally and internally funded PhDs. Hence we are, as noted before, developing a longer-term research grant strategy, which includes more applications for 2G projects. In addition, PS senior staff will be encouraged to apply (e.g., together with PA colleagues) for 3G contract research projects as well. This will enable us to appoint a higher number of PhDs. The current system does not provide us with budget for internally funded PhDs (1G), but obviously we support the committee’s plea to the University and the Faculty to make that possible as well. Besides 2G funding (which cannot be taken for granted), we will actively explore other ways to finance extra PhDs, e.g., via judo-contracts (with part-time teaching) and multi-annual research plans (MRPs).
- Finally, we are cooperating closely with the Faculty’s Graduate School of Social Sciences (GSSS) to further improve the PhD training program and the timeliness and success rate of our PhD students. Our PhD student also do coursework (in cohorts) at the Netherlands Institute of Government (NIG), the Dutch research school for political science and public administration.