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**Statement Executive Board
regarding the research review of Public Administration**

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Subject: statement Executive Board regarding the research review of Public Administration

The Executive Board of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam has received and considered the final report of the research evaluation of the research programme New Public Governance (NPG) covering the period 2014-2019. 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 an international peer review committee carried out in November 2020, formed the basis of the assessment.

The Executive Board appreciates the careful assessment by the committee and is pleased with the conclusion that NPG “is a strong and viable program with a good reputation and pronounced external visibility that combines high-quality interdisciplinary research with impactful outreach to society, valorisation, and stakeholder involvement”. The scientific quality and societal relevance of the programme are both assessed as ‘very good’, meaning that NPG conducts very good, internationally recognised research and makes a very good contribution to society. The committee assessed the viability as ‘good’, meaning that NPG makes responsible strategic decisions and is therefore well equipped for the future.

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

- Involve junior staff more systematically in interaction with stakeholders, knowledge hubs, labs, and different institutes;
- Intensify efforts to improve the share of second stream funding;
- Increase the staff diversity, especially gender diversity;
- Keep paying attention to balancing research time, teaching and outreach to society and other activities;
- Further improve overall coherence, create synergies with Political Science, and enhance interdisciplinary collaboration within the faculty’s Institute for Societal Resilience (ISR).

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The report and recommendations, together with a written response by the unit, have been discussed in a meeting of the Executive Board with the faculty (the Dean, the Dean of Research, Research Director of NPG, and Head of Department). 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.

Finally, the Board of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam wishes to express its gratitude to the international committee for the considerable time and effort invested in the assessment and to the research unit 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.

Response letter on Research Review VU Public Administration (NPG)

On behalf of the department's management team,
Patrick Overeem (research manager), p.overeem@vu.nl

Overall conclusion

In its conclusion, the review committee praises the NPG research programme as “a strong and viable program with a good reputation and pronounced external visibility that combines high-quality interdisciplinary research with impactful outreach to society, valorisation, and stakeholder involvement” (p.45).¹ The committee assesses NPG's research quality and societal relevance very positively – an appraisal which we find both realistic and reassuring. Despite calling the program “strong and viable”, the committee raises some understandable concerns about its viability and calls for investments by the Department, the Faculty, and the University to increase research time. We fully support its recommendations and consider them as congruent with our own sustained efforts. In order to design and implement them well, we have ongoing conversations with both our staff and with the Faculty.

In this response letter, we highlight the key points in the order in which they are presented (per section) in the report.

§6.2 Organisation, strategy, and targets

This section is mainly descriptive. We want to highlight three important observations:

- “Compared to other PA departments in the Netherlands, NPG is a fairly small research group” (39)
- “NPG puts a collaborative/networked approach in the centre of its research. NPG is distinguished by its normative and critical approach to PA.” (40)
- “Strong connections to stakeholders and contacts with public and private institutions are key to NPG's identity which is also reflected by the high share of third-stream funding and the predominance of contract research in the overall portfolio of funding.” (41)

Our response:

We fully recognize these observations as they match well with our own self-image. At the same time, they point to two important challenges, namely (a) the need to grow, also in terms of research input, in order to maintain NPG's long-term viability and (b) the need to diversify the funding portfolio, particularly with 2G money (see below).

§6.3 Research quality

Besides several factual observations and positive comments (e.g., about our international visibility, the resurgence in research output, and junior-senior cooperation), this section raises three specific points of attention:

¹ The scores are as follows:

- Research quality: score 2 (“Very good”): “The research unit conducts very good internationally recognized research”.
- Research relevance also 2: “The research unit makes a very good contribution to society”.
- Program viability 3 (“Good”): “The research unit makes responsible strategic decisions and is therefore well equipped for the future”.

1. *Second-stream funding*

- "There is strong third-stream funding but fewer second stream research grants (e.g. NWO-ORA, NWA)." (40)
- "The group acknowledged that it remains important for NPG to attract additional second stream funding. A number of measures have been taken for this" (41) [namely (1) the appointment of TT UDs, (2) the use of third stream money to stimulate fundamental research, and (3) collaborations with senior staff outside the department]. "The Committee endorses this approach to investing in grant applications and to further enhance the capacities for second stream research proposals." (41)
- The conclusion section adds: "The Committee encourages NPG to (...) intensify its attention to international publications in peer reviewed journals without devaluing the important research and publications in other formats." (45)

Our response:

We are glad with the committee's endorsement of our approach and are taking steps (e.g., the implementation of a 'research grant calendar') to further increase opportunities to acquire second-stream funding. The upcoming appointment of the new professor in Collaborative Governance is also important in this regard. Besides intensifying efforts to obtain more grants, we also work on realizing more international publications in leading PA journals (e.g., as output of contract research; see below). Smaller research teams (with junior and senior colleagues intensively working together) can create an environment to realize this.

2. *Institutional complexity*

- "Multi- and interdisciplinary work is highly valued in NPG. Junior researchers particularly appreciate the opportunities to collaborate with different disciplines (...) Junior staff and PhDs reported that it was not always obvious to them how to connect to these various networks and institutes, how they are interrelated and whether they are expected to present their work in one or more of them. The institutional landscape appears to be rich and multifaceted, but that also created some degree of opaqueness and confusion for junior staff. NPG could consider how to make clearer the various networking opportunities, and those can be built on strategically." (41)
- And in the conclusion section: "Concerning the interaction with stakeholders and the creative use of knowledge hubs, labs, and different institutes (ISR, TALMA), the Committee suggests junior staff be involved more systematically, e.g. by increasing the institutional clarity about these different collaboration formats." (45)

Our response:

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 stimulated and guided to develop such a profile by seniors/supervisors. They will also be assisted in navigating their way through the sometimes complex institutional landscape. Hence, we aim, first of all, to work, together with the Faculty, on ways to actively reduce complexity and therewith the administrative burdens this produces. This ties in with the planned restructuring of the ISR. Secondly, we will stimulate awareness about this issue among supervisors and provide clearer 'maps' of the institutional landscape, e.g., on the new website and in the recently established departmental digital newsletter, to help colleagues better 'find their way'.

3. *B&P cooperation*

- Six years after the merger of PA and Political Sciences into one department, synergies and more interdisciplinary collaboration are increasing. (...) However, there are still cultural differences (...) which makes a fuller integration of NPG and MLG more demanding than previously expected.

There is an opportunity with recent staff changes in research management to consider whether and how to encourage further integration.” (41)

Our response:

We agree 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. In the longer run, we want to develop (with the input and support from both our staff and from the Faculty) one research program with political science. Currently we explore a transition from separate disciplinary visitations to an integrated ISR visitation in the future.

§6.4 Societal relevance

This section is almost entirely laudatory. It praises NPG’s aim to combine rigor with relevance, its impact, and its successes in acquiring contract research. The ISR labs in particular are mentioned as a key factor for this. There is only one more critical remark, in the last sentence:

- “A challenge arises from the conversion of practically relevant research outcomes into publications in renowned international PA journals, requiring considerable additional effort.” (42)

Our response:

We are very content with the committee’s strong appraisal of NPG’s societal relevance. We sense from its remarks that it considers this aspect a real strength of the program. At the same time, we acknowledge the need to better translate contract research into scientific publications, so as to stimulate both rigor and relevance. In 2021, colleagues involved in contract research will be actively approached to discuss this point and to consider strategies (e.g., always realize at least 1 international publication after each project and reserve hours for this in the bid/budget, etc.) and possibly trainings (e.g., in relating outcomes of applied work to appropriate administrative theories, turning contract research reports into publishable journal articles, and finding appropriate journals) to achieve this. While aiming to expand our portfolio of 2G projects and international publications, we want to consolidate our current strength in 3G (contract) research, e.g., by stimulating ambitious assistant professors to do the acquisition and management of new projects. Moreover, applied research performance should be ‘recognized and valued’ (*erkennen & waarderen*) on its own merits.

§6.5 Viability

In the section on viability, the committee emphasizes several factors that could make the position of the NPG program vulnerable (small size, work pressure, high dependence on third-stream money, the ambition to grow). Here are two quotes we want to highlight:

- “...the high proportion of third stream funding does have implications for the management of funds and research time, due to higher transaction costs and management of this income compared with other sources funding (...) Generally, only longer-term contract funding enables the appointment of PhD researchers for example. Furthermore, positions based on short-term

contracts also create uncertainties for staff members and entail the risk of precarious employment. Therefore, *the Committee strongly encourages NPG to balance its third stream funding with continuing its current strategy to intensify applications for second stream funding, including with larger (international) consortia.*" (42; italics added)

- "The Committee appreciates (...) activities to stimulate growth and expand research time since they help enhance the overall viability of NPG. However, NPG has limited organisational slack which makes the situation more precarious if there are additional cutbacks and austerity measures in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic. Taking the cuts in direct funding over the last years and the decreased number of permanent staff into account, the Committee therefore has concerns that additional cutback measures could seriously harm. Given the huge strides which have been made in recent years to recover levels of publications, increase funding, have societal impact and carve out additional research time, this would be a waste and so *the University is urged to value and protect the efforts and institutional arrangements of this group.*" (42; italics added)

Our response:

We recognize and share the committee's concerns about the need for a durable financial basis of the program and we obviously agree with the committee's call to the University and the Faculty to "value and protect" our program and help facilitate its flourishing. This is of course not just a matter of money (however necessary, too), but also of institutional protection and support of our research culture. Fortunately, the committee also mentions several of our own initiatives to deal with this issue, such as "converting contract research into second-stream projects" and hiring a "new chair in Collaborative Governance" with strong 2G potential as well as "intensify[ing] applications for second stream funding, including with larger (international) consortia" (p.42). In these ways, we try to increase our efficiency and resilience and avoid making ourselves dependent upon (uncertain) additional means 'from above'.

§6.6 PhD program

A description of the PhD program is followed by some critical observations:

- "the Committee observed that the number of PhD graduates at NPG is very low during the assessment period. (...) The Committee suggests that NPG devise a strategy to increase the completion rate." (43-44)
- "PhD candidates suggested that improvement could be made at NPG in the size and -particularly- diversity of its academic staff. For instance, the PhD candidates missed having female lead figures. They would also like to draw more on the extensive network for international cooperation, and want to collaborate more with researchers in the other departments in the faculty. Lastly, new PhDs report that they work in a complex department and faculty. They are part of different structures and institutions at the same time." (44)
- It "encourages NPG to use the master's program still more systematically for talent management and to extend the efforts of recruiting new PhD candidates from this talent pool." (44)

Our response:

The PhD completion rate is indeed a point of attention and we are working with the Graduate School on ways to improve this. It is a complex issue, however, particularly with a high share of external PhDs and with very diverse personal and professional circumstances of our candidates. Partly for this reason, but also for the sake of building the research community at the Department, we are looking for ways to get more contract-based PhDs (particularly via second-stream projects). Candidates can indeed very well be recruited from our own master's program, the FSS research master, and the national research master based in Utrecht in which we participate. Shortage of candidates is not really our problem – we see several very talented students whom we would like to hire as PhD-students if we had the means – and we do want to recruit widely (also internationally). 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). The point concerning institutional complexity has been discussed above and that concerning diversity will be addressed below.

§6.7 Research integrity

No critical comments or recommendations.

§6.8 Diversity

The committee notes the “lack of diversity” (recognized in our self-study report), “particularly the representation of women at senior level (full professors)” as well as ethnic diversity (44). It recommends to use “recruitment and talent development policies” (45) to further diversify the team. In the conclusion, it says: “...increasing the staff diversity appears to be another key challenge to be addressed by NPG.” (45)

Our response:

We recognize the need to further diversify our staff and adopt the committee’s advice to be attentive on this matter. The committee rightly points to the recent hirings of four female UDs at the Department and the recent hiring of a female professor of Collaborative Governance. In addition, we will make efforts to further increase cultural diversity among our staff and promote an inclusive working environment. The management of both the Department and the Faculty is very keen on continuing to hire members of underrepresented groups and stimulating talented colleagues from such groups in their careers.

§6.9 Conclusions

The conclusion section contains some additional remarks (besides praise and repetitions of earlier points) that deserve attention:

- “The further improvement of NPG’s overall coherence, its organisational and conceptual consolidation as a research group striving for an integrated approach, bridging subgroups, creating synergies with PS and intensifying the interdisciplinary collaboration within ISR merit continued efforts in the future.” (45)
- “Work pressure for research staff has grown and junior staff in particular perceive teaching loads and numbers of students as increasingly onerous. The Committee acknowledges that NPG has taken a number of measures to remedy these problems, such as a new tenure model with more research time, additional positions and strategies for enhancing grant applications, and reworking the financial model for teaching. To guarantee an academic environment that fosters productivity and to uphold staff members’ motivation the balancing of research time, teaching load and outreach to society and other activities need continued attention, especially taking junior staff’s situation into account. Furthermore, efforts should be intensified to attract prestigious grants and to convert successful contract research experience and contacts into second stream grant applications, which has considerable potential.” (45)
- “... it is in the interest of the university to maintain the institutional resilience and viability of NPG as an important international PA research centre... (...) ...it would be a false economy to cut the group financially, as they have the talent and the imagination to further enhance research quality and productivity. Strong endorsement and recognition from the faculty and the university are important conditions for maintaining high performance and viability of NPG in the long run.” (45)

Our response:

In our view, these three important issues (institutional complexity, work pressure, and financial support) are very much related to each other. Work pressure could be substantially alleviated by reducing administrative complexity within the Department and the Faculty and by securing not only a

high influx of students and third-stream money, but also a greater share of second-stream (and possibly first-stream) funding. In each of these cases, it is essential that our ability to hire is in pace with the influx of finances (and students). Especially the latter will contribute to many of our goals, e.g., more international publications, more contracted PhDs, lower turnover, and less financial vulnerability. Closer cooperation and, at points, integration with Political Science and beyond the Department with other disciplines and departments/faculties (ORG, SOC in FSS, but also NSCR, SBE, Law, and FGW at the VU) and sister universities also seems promising in these regards.