

ISS Mid-Term Research Review

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1. Introduction

The International Institute for Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) is a research and postgraduate training institution located in Den Haag, the Netherlands. Since its creation in 1952, and its incorporation within Erasmus University in 2009, it has built a global reputation for high quality training and research on a range of topics related to international development.

This document is a mid-term assessment of the ISS research program titled **Global Development and Social Justice**. It follows earlier evaluations that covered the period 2005-2010 and 2011-2016. It was conducted by three independent evaluators during the period May-August 2023:

- Dr. David Dodman (chair): General Director, Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies (IHS), Erasmus University Rotterdam
- Professor dr. Eleonora Nillesen: Professor of Public Policy and Development, Maastricht University
- Dr. Althea-Maria Rivas: Senior Lecturer, Global Development, Peace and Conflict, SOAS

Dr. Veronika Goussatchenko was appointed to support the committee in taking minutes and accessing documentation.

The members of the committee were requested to assess the quality of research conducted by ISS as well as to offer recommendations to improve the quality of research and develop the research strategy of ISS. The evaluation includes a backward-looking and a forward-looking component, although in a mid-term review, the former component dominates. Specifically, the Committee was asked to judge the performance of the unit on three **main assessment criteria** and offer its written conclusions as well as recommendations based on considerations and arguments. The main assessment criteria are:

- 1) Research quality
- 2) Societal relevance
- 3) Viability of the unit

During the evaluation of these criteria, the Assessment Committee was also asked to incorporate four specific aspects. These aspects were included as they were identified as becoming increasingly important in the current scientific context and help to shape the past as well as future quality of the research unit. They are the following:

- 1) Open Science: availability of research output, reuse of data, involvement of societal stakeholders [*primarily covered in section 3, Research Quality*]
- 2) PhD Policy and Training: supervision and instruction of PhD candidates [*primarily covered in section 6, special analysis of the PhD program*]
- 3) Academic Culture: openness, (social) safety and inclusivity; and research integrity [*primarily covered in section 5, Viability*]
- 4) Human Resources Policy: diversity and talent management [*primarily covered in section 5, Viability*]

These four additional aspects were not expected to be evaluated separately but as part of the assessment of the three main criteria. However, two 'special analyses' were undertaken and are documented below: the PhD program and research; and ISS research, diversity, and decolonization.

Additional details on each of the three main assessment criteria and guidelines for evaluation are provided in Box 1.

Box 1: Assessment Criteria and Guidelines for Evaluation

Research quality: the quality of the unit's research over the past six-year period is assessed in its international, national or – where appropriate – regional context. The Assessment Committee does so by assessing a research unit against its own aims and strategy. Central in this assessment are the contributions made to the body of scientific knowledge. The Assessment Committee reflects on the quality and scientific relevance of the research. Moreover, the academic reputation and leadership within the field is assessed. The Committee's assessment is grounded in a narrative argument and supported by evidence of the scientific achievements of the unit in the context of the national or international research field, as appropriate in relation to the specific claims made in the narrative. The Protocol explicitly follows the guidelines of the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) adopted by KNAW, VSNU and NWO.

Societal relevance: the societal relevance of the unit's research in terms of impact, public engagement and uptake of the unit's research is assessed in economic, social, cultural, educational or any other terms that may be relevant. Societal impact may often take longer to become apparent. Societal impact that became evident in the past six years may therefore well be due to research done by the unit long before. The Assessment Committee reflects on societal relevance by assessing a research unit's accomplishments considering its own aims and strategy. The Assessment Committee also reflects, where applicable, on the teaching-research nexus. The assessment is grounded in a narrative argument that describes the key research findings and their implications, while it also includes evidence of societal relevance in terms of the impact and engagement of the research unit.

Viability: the extent to which the research unit's goals for the coming three-year period remain scientifically and societally relevant is assessed. It is also assessed whether its aims and strategy as well as the foresight of its leadership and its overall management are optimal to attain these goals. Finally, it is assessed whether the plans made, and resources provided are adequate for implementing this strategy. The Assessment Committee also reflects on the viability of the research unit in relation to the expected developments in the field and societal developments, as well as on the wider institutional context of the research unit.

Source: Strategy Evaluation Protocol, 2021-2027, VSNU, KNAW, NWO.

The main sources of information for the Committee were a self-evaluation report (Annex I) and a site visit conducted on 9 June 2023 (Annex II). These were supplemented by documentation including:

- Self-assessment report on ISS research 2011-2016
- ISS Research Assessment Report (November 2017)
- ISS Strategic Plan 2018-22
- ISS framework document: *Creating a framework for societal relevance* (August 2021)
- Erasmus University Rotterdam: *Defining Societal Impact at EUR* (January 2023)
- ISS Science Communication Strategy (May 2023)

2. Aims and Strategy for ISS Research

According to the ISS Strategic Plan (2018-22), ISS aims to be:

- 1) A world-renowned research-intensive and civic university institute - with high societal relevance - in global development & social justice based in The Hague.
- 2) A space for critical engagement embedded in (global and local) society (platform function).
- 3) An open, transparent, safe and inclusive space to work and study.

The research vision from this strategy is: “to produce internationally competitive, critical development-oriented research with substantial relevance to society and high-quality education in development studies, in order to contribute to the enhancement of well-being and social justice and a more equitable world”. This Strategic Plan also contains several aims that speak specifically to research (Box 2).

Box 2: Research Aims in ISS 2018-22 Strategic Plan

Aim 1.2 To continue to achieve excellence in research in Global Development and Social Justice

Aim 1.3 To foster cooperation between research groups and themes

Aim 1.4 To bring research and education – at PhD and MA level – more closely together

Aim 1.5 To align the PhD programme with the overall ISS research programme

Aim 1.6 To make the PhD programme effective and supportive, including supervision and care

Aim 1.7 To continue acquiring externally funded research programmes

Aim 1.8 To profile our expertise on societal relevance of research, develop a methodology for societal relevance and impact, and share with others

Aim 2.3 To (thus) become a *civic* university institute (in The Hague)

Source: Research Aims in ISS 2018-22 Strategic Plan

3. Research Quality

The section provides an assessment of the research quality at ISS examining scientific output and relevance, as well the institute's academic reputation and leadership. The order in which topics are discussed will largely follow that of the self-assessment report.

The organization of research across the Institute

ISS has become more research intensive since 2005, reinforced by joining Erasmus University in 2009 that opened additional funding opportunities through NWO and possibilities for collaboration and funding instruments through the Leiden-Delft-Erasmus (LDE) consortium. The self-assessment report lists several LDE collaborations that testifies to the complementarity of ISS and the different centers/networks within the LDE consortium.

The institute describes itself as a “societally relevant, multidisciplinary, research-intensive university-institute in critical development studies.” Our reading of the self-assessment report as well as the interviews we had with the different panels aligns with this view, however it is less obvious to us why they refer to themselves as an institute in critical development studies, as opposed to an institute in development studies. ‘Critical’ also appears as the first research principle: if this is indeed a defining feature of ISS that sets it apart from other development studies institutes, it would be good to explain what is meant by this and find ways to instill it more fully throughout research programs and curricula.

The organization of the research around four groups and four cross-group research themes is helpful in providing focus on the Institute's key areas of interest. What is interesting to note though is that Development Economics and Political Ecology are typically considered subdisciplines/subfields whereas the Civic Innovation and Governance, Law and Social Justice groups seem to be organized thematically, although all these elements are rather ‘mainstream’ in development studies. It might be useful to think about whether this dual structure plays to the strength of the institute. Another observation on the matrix structure (groups/themes) is that topics such as digital technologies, big data etc. have been recognized by ISS as key emerging research areas (e.g. testified by hiring a full professor working on these issues) but have not (yet) made their way into the matrix. The preparation of a new research strategy would probably be an appropriate time to consider making the themes consistent (either as ‘subdisciplines’ or ‘themes’), to incorporate new expertise (from recently hired staff), and to explicitly link these with the aspiration to be ‘critical’.

Research time is being allocated based on research output, where researchers are classified into one of three categories (teaching intensive, research active and research intensive with corresponding research time allocations of 0.1, 0.25 and 0.4 FTE respectively) according to the number of points they have earned for their publications (journal articles, book chapters and books). This system has been in place since 2009 and has seen a gradual change from a relatively equal split across the three profiles to one where there is a stronger emphasis on research intensive profiles. This is in line with the institute's ambition to further strengthen its research component. During the interview the committee raised some questions system related to the system's implicit ranking among colleagues and the incidence of ‘moving down’. People seemed generally quite unconcerned about the ranking and informed us that while in theory people can ‘move down’ this does not happen in practice. A question however remains to what extent upward

mobility is still possible for people with research active and teaching intensive profiles (if they aspire to this). We did not ask this question during the interviews, but it would be important to know whether people in the other two profiles feel constrained in moving up? People with a lot of dedicated research time often enter a virtuous cycle where more research time leads to more and higher quality output, a higher likelihood of obtaining grants, which again leads to improved output etc. while it is not so clear if and how it may affect others within the institute. This may warrant further internal discussions which should probably be tied to the university-wide Rewards and Recognition policy that is yet to be operationalized.

Research productivity, quality, and impact

In terms of research output and quality using conventional metrics (e.g., CERES journal list, 5-year impact factors) the Institute is maintaining a stable output of refereed journal articles and books in the last five years with the highest share of articles/books/book chapters ranked A/B as listed in the 2017-2022 self-assessment report. The output per capita of 1.6 journal articles, 0.3 books and 1 book chapter per year is good and reflects a steady increase and proportional shift (i.e., more journal articles, less book chapters and books) from the previous assessment period (2011-2016). There seems to be diversity within research groups in terms of how well they perform in terms of conventional metrics, yet it became clear during the interviews that there seems to be widespread agreement within the institute that such conventional metrics are only part of the story and staff members reported to be happy about the diversity in publishing. Early and strong engagement with societal actors through research and capacity building has always been at the heart of ISS and are probably also considered when making decisions about promotions and hiring. Yet exactly how did not become clear to us, neither through the self-assessment report nor through the interviews, except for a reference to the EUR-wide Rewards and Recognition policy that is not yet implemented. In view of its increasing importance – also when it comes to obtaining grants – it is probably worth considering more holistic forms of assessment, including how research time is being allocated (which currently depends solely on standard publication measurements) and whether that can likely sustain in the future.

The committee also recognizes the success of several academic staff members in obtaining prestigious individual grants including the Spinozapremie, VICI grant, two ERC starting grants and two ERC Advanced grants. These are extremely competitive grants awarded to innovative top-quality research and researchers. This testifies to the quality of the research that is being conducted at ISS. Next to the individual grants there is also an impressive list of thematic grants received. During the interviews we discussed the distribution of grant recipients within the institute.

While it was clearly acknowledged that there is only a selected number of very successful senior individuals, there was also a general feeling among staff and PhD students that there is enough scope for more junior people to get involved and collaborate with successful seniors when applying for grants. It was mentioned during the interviews that ISS is relatively less successful in obtaining second-stream funding (KNAW and NWO). The high proportion of international staff and the typical global orientation in terms of research were mentioned as possible reasons by ISS staff. The Dutch starter grants were also mentioned as a possibility to ultimately obtain more second-stream funds as those grants would give assistant professors a chance to build their CV and hence become stronger competitors for individual grants. We did not ask this during the interviews but there are designated trainings to prepare academic

staff to apply for a Veni-Vidi-Vici grant at most, if not all Dutch universities. We expect this also to be the case at EUR. If ISS staff is not yet participating in such training, it would be highly recommendable to explore possibilities to do so.

The committee was pleased to see various internal initiatives to stimulate collaboration across research groups on the cross-cutting themes (RIF) and between MA students and ISS staff (MATP) which aligns with the institute's overall strategy and aims. We also felt that staff members are very appreciative of these opportunities created from within the institute, which demonstrate the Board's commitment to being research intensive.

The QS World University ranking of ISS in Development Studies has substantially increased over the last four years from 48 to place 11 in 2022. This is a remarkable and outstanding achievement that can hopefully be sustained over time.

4. Societal Relevance

The section reflects on evidence of societal relevance in terms of the impact and engagement of the research unit and to some extent on the teaching-research nexus. This section considers the societal relevance of the ISS's research in terms of impact, and public engagement. Societal relevance is considered in relation to the research unit's accomplishments in line with its aims and strategy and uptake of the research is assessed in economic, social, cultural, educational or any other terms that may be relevant.

Relevance, Impact and Engagement

Building on the aims of the ISS Strategy 2018-2022 a framework for Societal Relevance was developed by the Institute in 2022 which articulated an ISS approach to relevance, impact and engagement of research and gave space for the heterodox epistemological and methodological positioning of ISS researchers. The ISS framework defines relevance as “issues that are relevant for sustainable global development and is driven by the key values of social justice, equity and inclusion.”¹ Impact is defined according to the NWO as the “cultural, economic, industrial, ecological or social changes that are entirely or in part the consequence of knowledge and expertise generated by research.”² The ISS approach acknowledges the importance of both relevance and impact but prioritizes the desire and positioning for impact in terms of process over results. As such it emphasizes the need to consider questions of intended change from the outset of the research design, the importance of engagement with research participants and stakeholders throughout the project cycle and the need to develop strategies for the communication of research and results to enhance uptake. The ISS approach touches on issues regarding knowledge production and research communities, and engagement that are also key to the Institutes commitment to decolonizing and diversity (see Section 7).

Scientific and social relevance

There have been significant changes in the global development context since the research goals were set in 2017, which means that this assessment is able to review the extent to which ISS's research infrastructure is able to respond flexibly and rapidly to new challenges.

Most notable among these is the global Covid-19 pandemic. This has both highlighted new issues and themes within international development research, and the need for different modes of operating in this environment. At the same time, and perhaps of even greater significance during this period, there have been growing calls for the decolonisation of international development research and practice (see Section 7).

ISS staff responded ably to the issues and priorities arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. Previous work was demonstrably valuable in engaging with the ways in which a ‘health emergency’ shaped experiences of development, while new work from across the research groups and themes helped to understand the

¹ See Appendix 4. *Societal relevance of research: towards a framework on societal relevance (2022)*, developed by Joanna Baskott and Inge Hutter.

² See www.nwo.nl/sites/nwo/files/documents/Leaflet%20Knowledge%20Utilisation%20-%20web.pdf

effects of the pandemic and how to respond to it (e.g. the book on *Covid-19 AND International Development* edited by Elissaios Papyrakis). More broadly, several emerging areas of ISS research (e.g. on the humanitarian-development nexus; technology and development; urbanization) reflect emerging issues and trends.

ISS and its staff have clearly engaged with many of the emerging and ongoing trends and topics in the discipline of Development Studies, including methodological changes (e.g. around co-production) and conceptual changes (e.g. around decolonization). There is a strong focus on co-authorship (although in recent years this has become an established approach across a wide range of social science disciplines). At a conceptual level, there appears to have been only limited consideration of the overall direction of 'development studies' as a discipline, and limited engagement with debates around switching from 'international' to 'global' development as a broad orientation for the discipline. The special section on 'ISS research, diversity, and decolonization' addresses these issues in more depth.

There is, perhaps, a tendency towards addressing 'mainstream' issues and geographies in international development. This would indicate the potential for considering whether and how ISS researchers might 'think outside the box' to identify new and emerging themes, to work with understudied groups, and to undertake work in under-studied locations.

The societal relevance of the research according to the framework definition is well demonstrated. The Self-Evaluation in 2022 profiled five PhD alumni portraits and five research-related cases which spoke to the societal relevance, engagement, and impact of ISS research and alumni. During the Committee Assessment interviews several of these projects were highlighted in addition to recognition of significant work undertaken by faculty in a range of areas including economic diplomacy, renewable energy, and degrowth, and the notable contributions of Prof Hilhorst in humanitarian studies, Prof. Jun Borrás in scholar activism and land grabbing, and Prof Icaza's scholarship on decoloniality to note a few examples. The success at grant capture, contributions to the ORS and on the conventional publication tables in terms of outputs also reflects an uptake and recognition of the work of, often but only senior, academics at the Institute. The Local Engagement Fund (LEF) and the upcoming *Development and Change* forum on the political economy of global reparations are evidence that the Institute has made efforts to speak to recent global dynamics.

Despite the opportunities of the cross-subsidization and a desire to demonstrate impact, the tension regarding the incentives to spend time on fostering research collaborations with diverse actors versus the rewards for producing high levels of more conventional research outputs seemed pronounced in certain research groups. There was a feeling communicated in several of the interviews that more space for collaboration with PhD students (see Section 6) and intellectual engagement across research groups and sub-groups would encourage innovations in scholarship and research. The creation of more space across the Institute for innovation and collaboration could foster new approaches to research, impact and ways of engagement but this would need to be accompanied by incentives that demonstrate the value of innovation in these areas and what might be considered higher risk research.

During the Assessment the Committee noted that both professional services staff and research faculty advocated for a dual approach which focused on demonstrating the impact of research and making research more impactful, and demonstrated an understanding that impact can be made in various ways.

This forward-thinking approach could be enhanced by further reflections about the relationship between engagement and impact particularly in relation to the ways in which the size and scope of a research project might dictate how the possibilities for impact are viewed and the resources attributed to the project.

It was clear from discussions with researchers that for many faculty, across the various research groups, there is a tradition of working with government stakeholders, civil society actors and local communities. Numerous examples from the history of ISS to more recent research endeavors were communicated to the Committee. Collaboratory and participatory research and to some extent co-authorship with research partners are important considerations for engaged research and some ethical discussions are taking place at the Institute about these topics. It was less clear, however, how these conversations have led to actual changes in practice within the Institute as opposed to a reinforcement of what is seen as an established way of working, and to what extent the challenges regarding decolonization, race and power have shaped new ways of thinking in this area.

Communication for relevance and impact

The effective communication of research is also a key element of viability. This refers not only to the dissemination of research findings (in both 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' formats), but also to the way in which these are communicated directly with key stakeholders. ISS researchers have a strong publication record in journals, while the institute itself provides strong support for its own journals and a range of other publications (although there is perhaps a slight lack of distinctiveness in the purpose of the different outlets). The social media impact of ISS is significant, but with the potential for expansion (for example, ISS has c6000 followers on X (formerly Twitter), compared to c84,000 for IDS (Sussex)). The Science Communication Strategy 2023-2025 is already beginning to address these issues and should be supported in its implementation.

As part of the communications strategy a range of online resources have been established. Each product has a clearly defined purpose and targeted audiences. *Research InSightS* is an online platform intended to showcase ISS staff and research using mixed media including interviews, and audio-visual outputs, including several videos on the ISS YouTube channel. *bliss* is a global development and social justice blog site aimed at stimulating debate and accessible to anyone affiliated with ISS. *DevISSues*, is an open access magazine focused on ISS's activities and alumni trajectories aimed mainly at current ISS students, alumni and staff. While there are a range of products the coherence between them may both strengthen the outputs themselves and reveal gaps in the communications strategy that could open the way for new initiatives, particularly aimed at garnering a wider public awareness and engagement with ISS research.

There was general acknowledgment, though some slight hesitation from certain faculty, that communications strategies are an important aspect of the research design and must be a collaborative effort between Grant Advisers, Research Communication Officers and researchers. There appeared to be some reluctance among senior researchers to engage in activities that they perceive as marketing, with one commenting negatively that "people are convinced we need fancy films about our research". This seems to indicate the need for further internal conversations about the role of communication and modes of communication, and perhaps an increased willingness for more established researchers to play a more

active role in communication activities that benefit not only themselves, but the institute as a whole (including less senior colleagues). Movement in this area may necessitate a cultural shift for many outside of their comfort zone and an investment in training so faculty can better understand and contribute to conversations on the possibilities and various platforms for knowledge exchange, impact, engagement and communication of research. A key challenge that was noted related to by the length of time it takes for impact to become evident and the limited duration of funding for projects.

5. Viability

This section on viability assesses the extent to which ISS is appropriately managed to achieve its research goals for the coming three-year period, and whether adequate resources (of various kinds) are available to implement the strategy. It also reflects on the viability of the research unit in relation to the expected developments in organizations operating in the field and societal developments, as well as on the wider institutional context of the research unit.

Relevance in relation to the broader field of Development Studies

The relevance of ISS's research needs also to be reviewed in relation to other global institutions conducting international development research. As mentioned in Section 3, ISS's scoring in the discipline of Development Studies has risen over recent years, from 48th globally in 2018 to 11th globally in 2022.³ Of the top-10 schools for Development Studies, six are located in the United Kingdom, 2 in the United States, and one in South Africa.⁴ Particularly in the aftermath of Brexit, it is highly relevant and necessary to have a world-leading Development Studies research unit based within the European Union (which, along with its member states, is a major global development actor) – particularly if the goals to be a more ‘critical’ center are taken seriously. While this significance was recognized during the site visit, there is perhaps potential for ISS to engage more directly with key EU development actors as a means of shaping research priorities and communicating research findings. In addition, with such a high proportion of the leading Development Studies research institutes being based in a single country, there is perhaps a particular need for strong institutions ‘outside’ this network to provide alternative conceptual and intellectual frameworks for the discipline.

Conversations with ISS staff indicated a recognition of the opportunity for research engagement with the Dutch government (not least due to ISS's location in Den Haag), and that perhaps more could be done on this. Demonstrating the significance of high-quality policy-relevant research to a range of government actors not only increases the impact of that research, but can also strengthen the funding base where this is seen to align with national priorities.

Operational responses to ensure viability

In operational terms, the viability of ISS research is greatly enhanced by appropriate ways of working. Decisions – and the implementation of these – about the staffing of the organization in recent years have both strengthened the institute's viability and provided a basis on which current and emerging challenges can be addressed. Central to this has been the implementation of a ‘talent track’ for recruitment, to employ staff from focus countries. In recent years, ISS has appointed academics from Ethiopia, Ecuador and Colombia, and has provided additional support to them in the first three years of the 6-year tenure track process to ensure their integration and contribution to the department. The appointment of new Professors from the Majority World (e.g. Arul Chib and Shuaib Lwasa) also strengthens the viability of the

³ Mid-Term Self Evaluation, p32

⁴ Mid-Term Self Evaluation, p32 (this only lists nine universities)

institute in terms of ensuring genuine international representativeness, and its positioning as a legitimate global voice on development issues.

It was clear that less senior academic staff feel clearly supported in the organization, which would appear to indicate that ISS's staffing has not only become increasingly diverse, but also that the inclusion of these staff has also been taken seriously.

The long-term viability of ISS's research can be supported by strong linkages between the institute's teaching program (particularly the Master of Arts in Development Studies) and the research program. Some of this is already in place, although discussions did indicate that there is the potential for stronger links between teaching and research.

The necessary institutional mechanisms to enable staff to undertake high-quality research appear to be largely in place: e.g. a sound mechanism for staff review and development, support for attending relevant courses, and the provision of an 'incentive fund'. New staff are appointed a mentor at ISS that helps them get to know the institute and provide advice on their academic career. Staff members are very appreciative of having a mentor and feel they are not constrained in any way to pursue their own research agenda, although they also indicated that the consistent application of mentoring was still an 'item of discussion'. As a result of the new collective labor agreement for academic staff in the Netherlands 14 Assistant Professors at ISS got a permanent position. Staff reported to be very happy about this development and felt there was more room to develop new initiatives and ideas without having to worry about their contract.

Interviews revealed little in the way of concern around funding trends for ISS's research (an issue also discussed in Section 3). At a national level, ISS has been successful in attracting Dutch Research Council (NWO) funding on thematic, non-continuous and *ad hoc* research, although less so on personal or 'talent programs'. However, this also seems to be a structural issue, with NWO recognizing that there has not been as much support to international or interdisciplinary researchers in the Netherlands as there might have been.

While it may appear mundane, the provision of support for researchers undertaking fieldwork is critical to the viability of a large and multifaceted program of Development Studies research. ISS appears to have the necessary elements for this in place, with adequate training on safety and security, and the integration of funding for this into research budgets. While an earlier analysis of security training was somewhat critical (particularly in the way in which overseas research sites were 'exoticised' and treated as 'dangerous') (see also Section 7), a lot seems to have been done in this regard since it was raised in the 2017 review. This is fundamentally important in creating an enabling environment in which critical development issues can be researched.

There were also positive comments about the project's office, and the way in which this has enabled ISS to pursue high quality research. In line with the institute's ambition to further strengthen its research component, including acquiring more external funds, outreach and communication an additional three members of support staff have been hired since 2019. Staff reported to be very satisfied with the support they received for applying for grants and conducting their research.

Conclusion

The 2017 Research Assessment concluded that ISS ranked as 'World Leading / Excellent' in terms of its viability, and this mid-term review would support a continued assessment at this level. The research field of 'development studies' remains vibrant, with high demand for taught postgraduate programs and PhD positions in the discipline and a large number of research funding opportunities; within this, ISS's goals and activities remain scientifically and socially relevant.

In common with the other 'international development institutes' in the Netherlands, ISS faces some uncertainty around funding for Masters students. While this is outside the immediate scope of this review, an interruption to the Masters program would disrupt the overall balance of teaching and research for ISS staff and would require changes in terms of seeking additional research funding. However, some staff expressed the potential for ISS to move further in the direction of becoming a research institute, and suggested that this might be a natural and continued evolution for the organization.

For the time being, the research groups (development economics; political ecology; civic innovation; governance, law and social governance) continue to be an appropriate model for organizing research in the institute, while the cross-cutting themes (migration and diversity, environment and climate change, conflict and peace, social protection and inequality) provide an alternative set of entry points to key challenges. However, and as indicated in Section 3, the initiation of a new research strategy would be an appropriate time to consider whether updates are needed to these.

6. Special Analysis: the PhD program and research

This section on the PhD program assesses the PhD program in terms of its recruitment, funding structure(s), supervision and research output and reflects on the extent to which these elements are conducive to achieving the Institute's research aims, particularly aims 1.4-1.6 as laid out in the ISS Strategic Plan.

Recruitment and funding

The PhD program has seen rapid growth in the past few years with the current number of PhD students amounting to 151 in 2022. PhD students are accepted on a rolling basis based on certain 'hard' criteria including a Masters' degree from a recognized university, a GPA of at least 3.00, and a specific requirement for internal candidates of having 8.5/10 for their Masters' thesis. In addition, there are 'soft' criteria including the excellence and fit of the research proposal within the institute.

The PhD program reflects a population that is geographically diverse with 49 nationalities represented among the current group of 151 students. There is also diversity in funding structures including (i) AIOs (salaried PhD positions); (ii) fully funded through external funds (scholarship, grant, project) and (iii) self-funded PhDs. Most PhD students are self-funded which implies their tuition fees may be waived but they will need to fully cover their own costs of living. Those that are not formally employed by EUR/ISS cannot take up teaching jobs that exceed more than 8 hours/week (0.2 FTE). This is different for AIO positions where teaching is considered part of the job profile.

Both PhD student representatives and staff acknowledge the challenges that come with having different funding structures, and especially for those PhDs that are self-funded. For several years ISS has issued admission letters that are valid for two years, therefore enabling prospective PhD students to defer their admission while finding sufficient financial support prior to the start of their PhD. Yet, according to the PhD student representatives this is insufficient and the constant struggle for financial resources plus the marketable experience of teaching leads to strong internal competition among the PhD population since the availability of teaching jobs is relatively small within ISS. Finding structural teaching opportunities at EUR and thinking about possible ways to provide every PhD student with the opportunity to gain teaching experience alongside their PhD research could be a fruitful and sustainable way forward.

Training and supervision

The PhD coursework at ISS comprises a minimum of 32 ECTs which is equivalent to 6 months of coursework. This is about half the amount of (compulsory) coursework similar PhD programs in the Netherlands require and offer. PhD students can take MA courses at EUR or courses at CERES and the EUR graduate school of social sciences and humanities. While they especially appreciate the courses offered by CERES there is a clear demand from the PhD students to have a more tailored and elaborate set of courses they can access as many feel they lack "foundational knowledge on key concepts and methods" (direct quote from one of the interviewees) relative to other Dutch university PhD students. Also, anything beyond the minimum coursework requirement seems to be mostly left at the discretion of the student and/or supervisor. A more elaborate package of coursework that on the one hand provides students with

essential foundational knowledge through compulsory courses that are mandatory for everyone and on the other hand a flexible set of elective courses tailored to the student's needs and interest (and that may be available at different Dutch universities) may help harmonize and strengthen the PhD program. One or maybe more courses should also pertain to generic skills (e.g. how to write and publish papers, guidelines for co-authoring, research ethics, etc.) and post-PhD career development both in-and outside academia.

Wellbeing and engagement

Despite obvious challenges, PhD students overall feel they are part of a united, collaborative, and engaged research community. They appreciate the diversity, the possibility to collaborate across research groups and exposure to different cultures and values and the fact that ISS has always been open to non-mainstream lines of thinking which they believe is a core strength and one of the appealing factors to do a PhD at ISS. Another reason is the strong focus on its ability to foster and strengthen connections between the Global North and the Global South. Yet since most students are non-Dutch and not necessarily well acquainted with official and unofficial Dutch rules, norms and values, many PhD students feel they lack support for better inclusion into Dutch society which affects both their wellbeing and their ability to focus on their research. They acknowledge and highly appreciate the dedicated welfare officer for the PhD community, but she has been on sick leave for a substantial amount of time (two years) and has not been replaced. Instead, staff members are now ad-hoc providing advice and services on top of their already full agenda, compromising the time they can devote to such tasks. Our discussions with the PhD representatives point to a clear need to think about a replacement for the welfare officer. Given the high proportion of international PhD students it would be imperative to have someone who is able to navigate the students through Dutch bureaucracy and keeps a close eye on inclusion and mental health of all members of the student population to ensure a supportive and caring PhD research environment.

Alignment with the aims in the ISS Strategic Plan

The discussions with the PhD representatives, academic staff and research development and research committee made clear that the PhD program at ISS comprises a vibrant research community of scholars striving for academic and societal impact on Global Development and Social Justice. PhD students while part of divergent research groups see sufficient scope and opportunities for cross-group and cross-theme collaboration with peers and/or their supervisors. PhD education could be strengthened by offering a more comprehensive package of coursework with possibly a generic core set of courses and specific electives tailored to individual interests and needs (and possibly outside ISS/EUR). Students have indicated that they do not mind teaching topics in MA courses that are not immediately within their own area of expertise.

Since PhD students come in with their own topics aligning the PhD program with the overall ISS research program might be a challenge although there might be possibilities to built-in some recruitment criterion that ensures broad alignment (and possible supervisory capacity on a prospective proposal topic) with the overall ISS research agenda.

Conclusions

The steady growth in the PhD program over the years indicates a successful program that can attract a diverse and high-quality pool of young scholars interested in Global Development. Notwithstanding the heterogeneity in topics, methods, and research groups there seems to be a cohesive PhD community where students feel at home. PhD students value the academic freedom and high levels of engagement at ISS and are generally satisfied with their PhD supervision.

There would be room for improvement on the educational part – courses that provide fundamental knowledge on core issues/methods/generic skills for all ISS PhD students might be beneficial. Given the substantial size of the program there would also be a critical mass of students attending these courses. In addition, it would be good to leave room for tailored specialized courses depending on the student's needs and interests that could be taken outside of ISS/EUR. Also, there seems to be a great demand for advice on career trajectories (including, but not limited to, academic careers) that is accessible for all ISS PhD students. Such training could potentially be embedded into the core coursework.

7. Special Analysis: ISS research, diversity, and decolonization

This section assesses the Institute's engagement with diversity and decolonization, with a particular focus on diversity and inclusion work at the institutional level. It also explores possibilities for building the research capacity in the area of decolonizing development, which was one of the emerging questions in the previous Self-Assessment report.

Diversity and inclusion

Alongside the diversity in disciplinary and methodological approaches ISS has recognised the importance of creating a diverse body of employees. Gender balance and geographic diversity were identified as priorities for ISS. The gender balance among staff fluctuated slightly between 2016 and 2022 with an overall increase since 2016. Since 2020, however, there has been a slight decrease in gender balance. The percentage of female faculty went down from 51% to 44% alongside an increase in male faculty from 49 to 56%. Accompanied by a slight decrease of female staff at the Assistant (from 14 to 11) and Associate level (from 6 to 5) and increase of male staff at the full Professor level (from 7 to 11). In 2022, the first female full professor from Latin America was appointed. This may account, however, for the decrease in female Associate Professors (-1) and the increase in Full Professors (+1) from 2020-2022.

Several hires have been made in the last three years including three Assistant Professors from the Global South and two full Professors of non-European origin (Uganda and India). The hires were part of a strategic recruitment initiative to increase diversity and strengthen relationships and joint research and teaching programs/hubs in specific countries. Currently there is almost a balance between European and non-European faculty with a 50% increase of faculty from the Global south from 2019 to 2022. The majority of female and Global South faculty are at the Assistant Professor level. It will be useful to move beyond thinking about diversity in terms of the Global North-Global South binary and gender and engage with questions about diasporic communities, race, ability, and gender-identity.

The institutional work on diversity is supported by a Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Coordinator, and a team of D&I Ambassadors. The D&I work at the Institute has increased over the past year and seems to focus on identifying Ambassadors, awareness raising and communication to staff and students, and increasing recognition of diverse communities through the promotion of events such as International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT) and Ketikoti. In the next few years as ISS builds on this work it will be important to consider what creating more inclusive spaces and building a more diverse faculty and student body really means and specifically what this requires in terms of changing the institutional environment and systems. Changes of this nature challenge established cultures, power relations and ways of doing things. An added challenge for a critical institution will be engaging seriously in the self-reflection that is required to dismantle internal power dynamics, inequality and cultural norms. This may require shifts throughout the Institute including in areas such as course curriculum, language policies, student evaluations, complaint procedures, staff training, promotion processes and mentorship programs.

Box 3: Thinking about Safety and Security and Diversity⁵

ISS faculty have developed several resources, particularly aimed at doctoral researchers, the safety and security in difficult areas for researchers. The work in this area was highlighted as a success during several interviews. The handbook, *Security guidelines for field research in complex, remote and hazardous places*, developed in 2017 by ISS researchers, is recommended as a must read for everyone traveling to high-risk countries across the Erasmus Graduate School of Social Sciences and the Humanities (EGSH). The related training course is currently mandatory for PhD students and an integral component of the CERES PhD Training Program.⁶ The course is not required for all staff but the materials were created to also be relevant for research assistants, respondents, and research collaborators. Reviews had taken place to ensure inclusive language was used and that there was sensitive to diversity. The Committee recognizes the positive response of other institutions and the additional funding that was awarded to the research and course development.

Box 3 is also a useful example, however, of an area where questions around power, diversity and intersectionality could be more deeply considered. Given the diversity of students (and researchers) at the ISS it was surprising to the Committee that the training resources offered little in terms of understanding the lived experiences and different realities of researchers, beyond more conventional questions of gender, and what this means in various contexts. The handbook for example, makes no reference to race, or intersectionality and only fleeting mention of gender, sexuality and gender-identity under the heading *Cultural Sensitivity*. It was unclear in the interviews how these issues were being addressed. While these are of course ongoing conversations, the lack of engagement with these different realities signals that there is not yet a comprehensive understanding of issues of diversity. Taking this seriously requires more reflection on what diversity means not only as a staffing issue but as a new way of thinking about academic spaces, research and relationship building, and the potential for developing new practices and approaches along these lines.

Decolonising Development Research

One of the emerging questions from the 2017-2022 Self-Assessment Report focused on the creation of additional research themes including Decolonizing Development Studies. During the interviews there was an identifiable interest among staff and students in the research agenda around decolonising development and the pressing questions that have emerged as a result of global and disciplinary conversations in the last five years, including the Covid 19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter. There is a long tradition of scholarship around decolonising development and decolonisation, but more recently, these topics have become key debates in the discipline and the development sector. Developing a dedicated stream of work around decolonising development at ISS would demonstrate the Institute's responsiveness to global challenges, reflect its commitment to socially relevant research and the values of social justice, equity and inclusion.

⁵ See: <https://www.egsh.eur.nl/phd-support/fieldwork-and-security/>

⁶ See https://www.eadi.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Trainings/CERES_2022-23_PhD_Programme.pdf

There is leadership capacity within the Institute in this area, as some ISS staff are contributing to decolonizing debates in Europe and globally. The work of Professor Icaza is internationally recognized and world-leading in this area. Prof Icaza and Prof Harcourt have also taken on lead roles in the COST Action Network on Decolonizing Development. Other examples that came up during the interviews included the Transformative Methodologies project and the *Development and Change* special virtual collection on Decolonizing Open Access in Development Research. From a research perspective, however, it is not clear how many ISS staff would identify themselves as working in this area and be positioned to contribute to this stream of work.

As a 'critical' development studies institution ISS will also be aware of the rhetoric and appropriation of the decolonizing agenda in ways that have depoliticized and misrepresented the radical intent of the scholarship and activism. That being the case there is an opportunity for ISS to carve out a position as a leader in this area of scholarship in the Netherlands, however, careful consideration is needed regarding where the work would be positioned in the Institute's research governance system. This work seems to be situated mainly in the Civic Innovation (CI) Research Group. The development of a stand-alone stream may be useful and help avoid the established pitfalls of mainstreaming. The development of this area of work, however, would require a clear political commitment by the Institute demonstrated by a level of investment in resources to build and support the stream of work, the researchers, and innovation in the area.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

As stated in the introduction to this report, the ISS research vision is:

“to produce internationally competitive, critical development-oriented research with substantial relevance to society and high-quality education in development studies, in order to contribute to the enhancement of well-being and social justice and a more equitable world”

This mid-term review concludes that ISS is indeed succeeding in making a substantial contribution to this vision. Based on the review of documentation and the site visit, the report authors would like to identify the following recommendations and opportunities for consideration as ISS moves into the final stages of this research strategy period.

The primary purpose of the interim report was to review activities that have already taken place. However, it also incorporated a forward-looking component. Based on this, the assessment committee propose the following areas for consideration during the remaining period of this research strategy and as the Institute moves towards a new research strategy. These recommendations fall into four broad areas: enhancing research quality; towards greater research impact; strengthening the enabling environment for research; and building ambition for diversity and decolonization at ISS.

Enhancing research quality

Reconsider the organization of research groups, as part of preparation for the next full research strategy. It may be fruitful to consider whether these are better organized around subdisciplines or themes – while the former may be more straightforward, the latter may enable more innovative research. Whichever is chosen, it is essential that the framework incorporates the expertise of recently hired staff (who have been explicitly tasked to develop new research areas for ISS).

Encouraging ‘ambition’ and thinking outside the box in terms of research topics and locations. There are some efforts to explore ‘global’ linkages around international development, including undertaking comparative work with the Netherlands (particularly in Den Haag).

Towards greater research impact

Work deliberately to position ISS as a leading voice within the European Union as a source of research and evidence to support development policy. ISS is one of the leading centers of academic research on the subject of Development Studies in the European Union. There is a clear opportunity for ISS research to be positioned more explicitly to have impact in shaping development policy in the EU.

Advance the communication of research findings using a range of different methods. The Science Communication Strategy 2023-2025 is already beginning to address this and should be supported in its implementation. This could be supported by the provision of training on media, interviews, social media strategies for all staff and students to encourage and promote research activities and partnership with diverse actors.

Consider updating the way audio-visual materials are presented. This could involve moving away from simply recording research seminars and creating output that are shorter and more targeted. For example, BIG Development Questions - Short videos (5-7 minutes) focused on one BIG development issue or question that profiles faculty and doctoral researchers, which is geared towards the general public. This could help to explain different sides of a debate and how ISS researchers are responding to/working on that issue. These outputs could be thematic with each research group feeding into the series, or could rotate among the groups.

Develop an 'Impact and Knowledge Exchange Fund' for non-funded research. This could help support and profile smaller and less visible projects and researchers.

Strengthening the enabling environment for research

Reflect on the 'research active' and 'teaching intensive' profiles, to ensure that opportunities are made available to all staff to conduct high quality research. While there is clearly a 'positive feedback' effect with the research active profile, there may not be adequate opportunities for staff who are not in this profile to develop their work in this way.

Investigate and implement mechanisms for staff mentoring with a particular focus on research. Efforts to expand and diversify research staffing at ISS are appropriate and welcome. But to make this meaningful and sustainable will require support for junior research staff, particularly through well-organized and implemented mentoring programs.

Identify structural teaching opportunities at EUR for PhD students. It is important to find ways for every PhD student to have the opportunity to gain teaching experience alongside their PhD research, and this could be a fruitful and sustainable way forward.

Expand coursework offerings for PhD students. This could include developing a more elaborate package of coursework that on the one hand provides students with essential foundational knowledge through compulsory courses that are mandatory for everyone and on the other hand a flexible set of elective courses tailored to the student's needs and interest (and that may be available at different Dutch universities) may help harmonize and strengthen the PhD program.

Building ambition for diversity and decolonization at ISS

Further incorporate diversity in impact and engagement activities into incentive, promotion and advancement processes. Some of the strengths of ISS are the diversity of methodological approaches and collaboration with different stakeholders and local actors, and the various types of research outcomes that are produced through individual and collaborative efforts. It is important to further encourage this diversity through the creation of clear and regular incentives that are incorporated into the promotion and advancement process at the Institute. The excellent work that has been done on defining impact could be complimented by the development of a framework that explicitly recognizes and measures diverse ways of achieving research impact.

Develop a clearer strategy around knowledge exchange and ethics as a framing piece for to more firmly root questions of justice, equality, and power into the relevance, impact and engagement work. Centering ethical considerations and power in impact and knowledge exchange discussions will assist in moving the conversation from best practice to concrete changes in practice and engagement and will further align this work with the Institute’s commitment to decolonisation and diversity.

Addendum to the Mid-Term Research Review of the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR)

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8th April 2024

Introduction

This document serves as an extension of the ISS Mid-Term Research Review 2023, with the inclusion of a PhD committee member and a goal to evaluate the institute on its main assessment criteria, reflecting on PhD research and training at the institute. The evaluation is primarily based on interviews with 6 self-funded or fellowship PhD students at ISS, The Self-Assessment Report for 2017-2022, and the 2023 Mid-Term Research Review. The addition of a fourth member supports the review committee in concluding its findings for the ISS Strategic Plan for 2018-2022. A PhD perspective is introduced to understand how the units' activities and initiatives have supported its research aims and mission for its growing PhD community.

The review features an analysis of the three main assessment criteria with commentary on open science, PhD policy and training, academic culture, and human resources in relation to PhD research at ISS. The documents were reviewed against the aims of the institute as they concern the PhD programme and in accordance with the institute's research vision: "To produce internationally competitive, critical development-oriented research with substantial relevance to society and high-quality education in development studies, in order to contribute to the enhancement of well-being and social justice and a more equitable world". A short summary of recommendations is presented at the end of this review.

Since most of the interviews were held with self-funded fellows who cover the majority PhD community, the analysis produces a limitation as it does not necessarily represent the voice of those who are employed as PhDs (AIO), working in partnership with other universities, or in diverse fellowship arrangements. The identity of the reviewer, as a woman from the global south conducting PhD research in Development Economics at a university in The Netherlands, informs their approach to evaluation, particularly in terms of assessing internationalisation, inclusion, and diversity.

Research Quality

From 2018 through 2022, ISS has made substantial contributions relating to societally relevant and high-quality PhD research and training. This assessment determines that PhD research at the institute has made meaningful contributions towards its mission. Particularly of note is the commitment of ISS and its PhD researchers towards engagement in critical development, including non-conventional research agendas, in Global Development and Social Justice. The reviewer acknowledges that the institute offers PhD researchers room to flourish and collaborate, the current model encourages academic freedom and provides a space for its candidates to innovate in the social sciences. ISS has established itself as a leading institute in PhD research and training in development studies and as a critical institute, based on tangible markers and a clear vision. The success of its growing PhD programme which attracts high-quality PhD talent is evidenced by diverse alumni profiles, publications by PhDs, and a strong outflow of PhD graduates.

In relation to aim 1.6: *'To make the PhD programme effective and supportive, including supervision and care'*, the Self-Assessment report acknowledges several challenges pertaining to supervision and care for which various steps have been undertaken, including assignment of a welfare advisor and the development of a formalised Training and Supervision Plan (TSP). In addition to updated PhD rules and regulations and a formalised TSP, care and supervision have the potential to be more equitable where every student is effectively supported, in terms of opportunities offered and the availability of the supervisory team. With this recommendation to close the gap in supervision delivery, it is important to take note that the norm is that PhD researchers are satisfied with supervision at the institute, several PhDs stated that their supervisors *'go the extra mile'* and invest substantial time and effort towards their students' research.

PhD training, as observed in the interviews, has been integral in building research skills and capacity. The review takes note of the TSP and the purpose it has served for tailored training, monitoring, and evaluation. Students have successfully participated in courses and opportunities that support their PhD research and skills. During conversations with candidates, it became evident that the student highly valued the new CERES courses, as well as classes in the MA Programme at ISS and training opportunities at other faculties. Yet, there is still a demand for courses which accord with a PhD level as well as increasing accessibility to skills and methods courses which are available at other faculties but do not necessarily have sufficient capacity. Additional opportunities for PhD training are largely at the discretion of the supervisor. Following the suggestion of the review committee to provide a flexible coursework set, dedicated codification and dissemination of learning opportunities can further support

access to and awareness of the current offering. The review acknowledges the availability of career workshops for students which are held at EUR. Job market trainings such as seasonal career workshops have been useful in supporting the capacity development of PhD researchers. Strengthening job market readiness to avenues specific to development studies can enhance sectoral alignment for candidates.

Societal Engagement

A notably positive observation of the institute is the availability of opportunities for productive and effective public engagement emboldened by a dedicated framework for societal relevance. PhD researchers have utilised avenues for critical engagement, including brown-bag seminars, seminars with external speakers, BISS, Research InSightS, and conference funding, in addition to engagement with actors in the global south such as capacity building and research presentations. Additionally, candidates are generally of the view that the institute offers adequate publication support and appreciate the dedication to open science. The flexibility of the self-funded PhD programme has allowed students to focus on issues of vital importance to the global south, which encouraged both novelty and quality enabled by conference and research group funding. Students acknowledge that these opportunities are both aided by and lead to more collaboration within the units' research groups. However, collaboration between the research group rarely reaches PhDs, even if topics are thematically aligned. Collaborative research and engagement within groups generally have encouraged PhD research, supported their PhD trajectory, and have not been limited to faculty; PhDs appreciate opportunities to collaborate with master's students. The commitment of the unit towards societal relevance is well-established and should be sustained through continued support and funding of academic and public engagement.

Viability

The Self-Assessment Report and PhD experiences acknowledge several challenges which come with the current structure and PhD recruitment diversity, in particular, the lack of opportunity towards university teaching and participating in grant acquisition which limits their integration within the broader academic community at the institute. PhD researchers have served various roles in the institute's governance, especially the IC, RDC, and IPSA. The reviewer was pleased to observe that the current structure enables institutional-level engagement and voice. However, one of the underlying issues, which may be influenced by the diversity in funding structures, relates to hierarchies in opportunities for negotiation with the research staff and supervisors which has influenced experiences in navigating

PhD policy, learning, fieldwork, and engagement. This was particularly noted during the COVID-19 Pandemic which created differences in policies related to contract extension.

The committee member acknowledges the focus on diversity and inclusion within the unit, as well as a commitment to integration and care, especially with the appointment of a welfare advisor to address PhD researchers' concerns and the introduction of a PhD Wiki. The efforts of the advisor were valued across the PhD research community. However, the long-term absence with no other personnel serving this role was noted to have influenced inclusion and integration. Since the PhD body largely consists of researchers from the global south, inclusion is certainly of central concern. The collegiality within the institute and cohesiveness among the PhDs have been prominent aspects of the academic culture at ISS in the current review period. PhD researchers have often relied on their colleagues for access to information and resolution of concerns related to integration into Dutch society and the unit. Since admissions are on a rolling basis, a dedicated onboarding programme for individuals/cohorts could support better assimilation, a suggestion which emerged from several discussions on PhD integration. Such processes may also be able to aid incoming PhD researchers set expectations and navigate norms related to PhD research and supervision at the unit.

There is no doubt that PhD research has been central to the activities of the institute, as three of eight key research aims for its strategy are related directly to the PhD programme, which is a vital part of the larger institutional structure. These structures reflect on the PhD experience as well. The unit houses a professionally run PhD programme with excellence in research and supervision at its core. Although a greater proportion of PhD researchers fall under the fellowship and AIO categories compared to the previous strategic period, funding has been acknowledged as a significant roadblock for an equitable PhD programme, because the heterogeneity in funding structures leads to apprehension and disparate experiences. Several dedicated institutional mechanisms are in place to drive an excellent PhD programme as acknowledged in interviews with PhD researchers and the Mid-Term Research Review. Future strategic impetus towards bringing experiences closer together could support a programme which has seen growth in both size and importance. The value addition of PhD research at ISS is integral to its success as an innovative, diverse, international, and inclusive institute. Despite clear challenges in funding heterogeneity, a proactive focus on bringing opportunities for teaching, MA supervision, and participation in grant acquisition and funding could support the growth of PhD researchers and their exposure to a broad array of academic skills.

Summary of Recommendations:

1. Sustain and where possible expand science communication and public engagement opportunities and funding. PhD researchers at the institute are passionate about making an impact with research and this sense of engagement is a unique strength;
2. Funding is a well-acknowledged issue in the self-evaluation and among the academic community. Apprehensions related to funding are diverse and lead to hierarchies of opportunity, power and negotiation which need to be systemically observed and addressed;
3. Support the ambitions of PhD candidates and enhance opportunities for academic engagement, particularly with regard to teaching. There is room to innovate towards finding non-mainstream avenues for growth in academic instruction for PhD researchers;
4. To strengthen governance, future initiatives could focus on transparency, internal communications, and onboarding to improve the connection of PhD researchers with the institute and their integration into Dutch society;
5. The unit's commitment to research excellence is acknowledged based on reviewed documents and interviews, PhD researchers contribute towards a critically engaged, diverse, and vibrant institute. The initiation of a new strategy should continue to support their meaningful engagement with the activities of the institute.