

Executive Board  
Attn. Rector Magnificus  
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*Maastricht*  
27 February 2018

*Subject:* FASoS Research Institute Assessment 2011-2016 - Reply by the Faculty Board to main issues raised in the report

Dear Rector Magnificus, *Dear Rianne,*

We are writing concerning the recent assessment of the FASoS research institute by an external committee put together by the QANU. The committee report, titled *Research Review - Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University*, has reached the University on 15 January 2017. The FASoS research institute received scores of 2 (very good) on all three criteria established by the SEP, namely research quality, relevance to society, and viability.

The Faculty Board (FB) would like to thank the members of the research assessment committee for their thorough and comprehensive assessment of our research institute and their clear and constructive advice. We appreciate the very good scores that the FASoS research institute received by the assessment committee and the confirmation of the world-leading quality of WTMC. While the response to the assessment of WTMC will be provided separately, this letter focuses on the advice provided to the FASoS research institute.

This response by the Faculty Board to the research assessment 2011-2016 is structured by responding to the formal recommendations that the assessment committee provided (p. 21 of the evaluation report). In some places we refer to additional explanations given by the committee in the main text of the report.

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**1. Reduce the workload of junior staff members by diminishing the administrative burden of applying for research time, for instance by introducing a general programme for short-term sabbatical periods which extends to junior researchers.**

The FB appreciates the consideration that the assessment committee gave to junior researchers at FASoS and recognizes the discussion on work pressure that stands behind this recommendation. The existing ART / SEO programme of the faculty is targeted at researchers who want to apply for additional research time which comes on top of the 40% research time that the standard contracts for assistant, associate and full professors provide at present. Applications for additional research time can for instance aim at preparing a funding application or finishing a high-profile publication. Until now, the funds have been specifically (but not exclusively) beneficial for junior and mid-career staff, and almost all applications by this group have been honoured in the past ART/SEO rounds. This policy is complemented by some other measures. In 2016, the faculty board increased the ART hours by 30% to increase the number of staff members that can profit from this policy measure. Outside of the ART/SEO policy, all Directors of Studies of a BA or MA programme receive 1,5 months additional research time per year that they have served as DoS (with a maximum of 6 months). In addition, we have decided to no longer appoint 'docenten 3' with a contract of only 20 or 30% research time. All these financial investments have been made to support staff in their research ambitions.

The current (light) application procedure for ART/SEO funds exists for three reasons: First, the FB commits to an efficient use of the financial resources it invests in additional research time. Second, FASoS is obliged to use the SEO funds (provided by the Dutch government to honour successful applications for EU funding) for the purpose of helping researchers with further EU funding applications. Third, it is established faculty policy to selectively support and encourage those colleagues to apply for funds who have a reasonable chance of success. The application procedure has been carefully designed to minimize the effort that is linked to applying for ART / SEO funds, while making sure that the limited available funds are used efficiently and in line with legal requirements.

An evaluation of the ART/SEO policy and the granting of additional research time are on the agenda of the Faculty Board for the academic year 2018-19. Hereby the existing measures as well as the application procedure will be critically evaluated. In its review, the FB will continue to pay special attention to junior and mid-career staff. We will also continue our policies for reducing work pressure, in particular in the area of teaching, in order to protect the contractually fixed research time.

**2. Develop a clear and widely supported vision on focal areas for nurturing world-leading research. This research should have mobilising power within the Faculty, and thus connect a range of researchers.**

This recommendation raises the question of whether the focal areas for research should be determined in a bottom-up or a top-down procedure. At the moment FASoS operates a mix of both approaches. The bottom-up perspective allows new ideas and research interests to develop and grow in line with the ever-changing societal challenges around us and the individual interests of researchers. A top-down structure is provided by the research programmes and the research centres. In close consultation with the FB, all programmes and centres have defined focal areas for research in the context of international and national discussions. These focal areas guide and

connect the work of individual researchers and embody our ambition to maintain and extend international visibility and excellence in these fields. The FB provides financial support to these focal areas in the form of fixed budgets for the research programmes and the centres.

The FB wants to continue this policy by further strengthening the role of the research profiles of programmes and centres in future recruitments. Applicants for positions at FASoS will have to fit our teaching needs, as well as the research profile of programmes and centres. Another aim is to further boost the interdisciplinary nature of FASoS research, noting that this can be one important 'building block' for FASoS to become world-leading (as suggested on p.14 of the assessment report).

The new Bachelor Digital Society, which we hope to launch in September 2019, will focus on the social, cultural and political impact of digital transformations in society. The programme will lead to the recruitment of new staff allowing to further strengthen the faculty's expertise in the field of digitalisation. Because of the topicality of the issue and the commitment both at the Dutch and European level to invest in this field, it is also to be expected that there will be substantial opportunities for grant applications. Research in this area will build on the already existing competence on digital culture in FASoS, especially in the AMC and MUSTS research programmes.

### **3. Contribute to innovation and theory-building and capitalise on the Faculty's interdisciplinary profile by reflecting on the methodology, epistemology, and theory of interdisciplinary work.**

The FB fully endorses this recommendation. A workshop is in preparation and a book publication project has started which brings together researchers from different disciplines. This will result in a thorough reflection on best practices on the potential of interdisciplinary research. Next, interdisciplinarity will be the focus of a future research 'heidag' of FASoS, during which we want to explore additional projects to foster and showcase the methods and theories of interdisciplinarity as practiced in FASoS. At that occasion, we will also explore how to further elevate the discussions about interdisciplinarity beyond the level of the individual research programmes to the faculty level and beyond.

### **4. Explore more pluralistic ways of benchmarking in order to gain a perspective on FASoS's position among the top research groups in the Netherlands and abroad.**

FASoS will continue to reflect on the most sensible and ambitious ways of benchmarking for its next mid-term research evaluation. We will continue to work with the university library staff whose assistance with benchmarking was highly useful for this research assessment. Meanwhile, we will keep a close eye on the development of faculties with a similarly broad research field as FASoS. Another development to take into account is the work of the Rathenau Instituut measuring the performance of the Dutch research system by global standards in various fields of research. An important consideration in benchmarking is to comply with the requirements of the SEP, which have been changing considerably in the past.

**5. Design a clear and proactive strategy to focus and strengthen the societal impact of FASoS research. Conscious choices should be made concerning which researchers and programmes to invest in and how to support them.**

The FB acknowledges that the societal impact or 'valorisation' of research is an increasingly important element of research policy at national, university, and faculty level. The current policies supporting valorisation will be sustained, keeping in mind that the best route towards successful valorisation will be excellent research that makes a significant contribution to addressing societal problems. An important asset in this respect is the focus of all FASoS research programmes and the interfaculty research centres on current societal challenges.

The faculty will continue with the support to valorisation activities through the valorisation stimulation fund, the valorisation prize, and the valorisation web page. In terms of future measures, we start from the position that successful valorisation is conditional on high quality research. We therefore do not believe in the added value of appointing a separate 'valorisation officer', as suggested in the report. The faculty board rather wants to invest in reviewing and strengthening the way in which the Marketing and Communications departments of FASoS and the UM can support researchers in making their research output and related valorisation activities more visible. In this context, we will continue promoting an understanding of 'valorisation' that focuses both on the contribution of research to addressing societal challenges and on public outreach activities ('impact'), in place of a more narrow emphasis on generating profits and patents from research. Another important focus will be to stay engaged in national discussions. Various FASoS colleagues have been participating in the preparations of the Dutch National Science Agenda and the faculty is currently involved in the preparation of the sector plan of the Social Sciences and Humanities where valorisation also occupies an important place.

**6. Invest in open access publishing of a selection of top publications to increase FASoS's visibility and impact world-wide.**

The FB recognizes the importance of promoting open access publishing of research. A number of measures are planned or already under way to achieve this objective: The FB as well as the research programmes and centres will further raise awareness about existing support for open access provided by the university, the NWO, and the Dutch government, which has negotiated preferential contracts with major publishers. The research programmes and centres will encourage their members to publish in journals which offer open access possibilities, provided that the ranking and academic visibility of these journals is deemed sufficient. The FASoS research panel, which provides feedback on draft grant applications, will monitor whether researchers reserve monies for open access publishing in their funding applications.

The research programmes are already now identifying their top publications for the purpose of the annual scientific report and the research assessment exercises. In cases where the existing agreements do not grant open access to journal articles that are identified as top publications by the research programmes, the faculty will look into possibilities for providing additional funds.

**7. Invest in the long-term viability of the interfaculty research centres in order to continue providing FASoS researchers with collaborative opportunities within and outside Maastricht University and in order to continue benefiting from the research funding these centres generate.**

The FB emphatically endorses this recommendation. Together with the other faculties participating in the interfaculty research centres, FASoS is currently exploring possibilities for putting the centres on a more sustainable financial basis. To that end, it is preparing a proposal that will be submitted to the UM Executive Board. Next to financial support by the UM Board and the participating faculties, the university is also exploring support by the Province of Limburg. As recognized by the committee, the centres play a key role in initiating cross-faculty collaboration, helping with public outreach, 'valorising' research, and operating as a hub for liaising with local residents, the municipality, the province, and other regional actors.

We hope that these remarks give a good overview on how FASoS wants to react to the remarks and questions put forward in the final report of the assessment committee.

With best wishes,



Prof. dr. Sophie Vanhoonacker,  
Dean FASoS



prof. dr. Thomas Conzelmann,  
Associate Dean for Research, FASoS