VU ✦ VRIJE
UNIVERSITEIT
AMSTERDAM

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DATUM	ONS KENMERK	UW BRIEF VAN	UW KENMERK
11 april 2023	BETA/FB/AK/sz/140		

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Betreft: Aanbieding onderzoeksevaluatie Informatica

Geachte rector, beste Jeroen,

Op 24 t/m 28 januari 2022 vonden de site visits plaats voor de landelijke onderzoeksevaluatie van negen afdelingen Informatica, waaronder die van de VU. Het eindrapport van de evaluatie omvat een aantal conclusies en aanbevelingen.
Over het algemeen herkennen we ons in het beeld dat door het panel wordt geschetst en zien we de aanbevelingen als goede handvatten voor de verdere ontwikkeling van het onderzoek dat binnen de afdeling Informatica wordt uitgevoerd.
In de bijgaande respons van het afdelingshoofd van de afdeling Informatica van de Bèta Faculteit, prof. dr. Jaap Heringa, wordt uiteengezet hoe de aanbevelingen in de komende periode worden opgepakt.
Ik hoop dat met deze brief en de respons van prof. dr. Heringa helderheid is gegeven over de opvolging van de onderzoeksevaluatie van de afdeling Informatica.

Met vriendelijke groet,
Namens het Faculteitsbestuur,

Prof.dr. A.D. Kraneveld,
Decaan Bètafaculteit Vrije Universiteit

CC: Richard de Waard (r.dewaard@vu.nl)

FACULTEIT DER BETA WETENSCHAPPEN
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National Research Assessment Computer Science 2015-2020

I am writing in reaction to the assessment report by the International Review Committee for the Dutch national research assessment of Computer Science. The committee, chaired by Prof. Jos Baeten (*Professor emeritus* and retired director of CWI Amsterdam), assessed nine computer science departments (OU, RU, TU/e, UL, UM, UT, UU, UvA, VU) and three research schools (ASCI, IPA, SIKS) in the computer science domain over the period 2015-2020, where the visitations took place from 24th to 28th January 2022. We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude for the large effort and rigorous evaluation conducted by the committee.

Assessment

We are delighted with the committee's positive assessment of our research: (i) the quality and scientific relevance of our work were deemed excellent, while the committee lauded our collaborations both within the department as with other academic partners. Regarding within-department collaboration, the committee liked the department's thematic horizontal cluster-based organisation, in addition to the vertical research groups, where researchers are free to join the clusters as they like. A particularly strong point according to the committee was that our research covers the whole spectrum from fundamental to applied research with a clear societal impact. (ii) Regarding the viability of the department, the committee stressed there is good cause for optimism given stable funding, high and competent research production, and obvious societal relevance of our work.

The committee noted the collaborative spirit and informal atmosphere within the department and urged us not to lose this informal culture with further growth of the department, especially at the lower levels. The committee also appreciated our coaching system in which junior staff is mentored by senior staff outside their own group. Finally, the committee commended how the department deals with open science aspects, mentioning open access publishing, working according to the FAIR data principles, and adhering to GDPR.

Recommendations

Several recommendations were given in the assessment report, which virtually all align well with already initiated developments. We will follow up on the committee's recommendations in further developing the research strategy and organisation of the department, as follows:
Research funding: Although the committee was pleased with our overall research acquisition, it advises to increase focus on obtaining EU Horizon funding. To address this, we are encouraging staff to try and apply for EU funding (e.g., Horizon and ERC), where our departmental project officer is trying to facilitate our staff by pointing them at relevant calls and lowering administrative burdens. We further make use of professional companies to assist in compiling large grants (e.g., NWO Gravitation and ERC Advanced Grant). Given that the department is involved in several projects with industry, which typically are not long-lived, the committee further recommended we prioritise proving fundamental funds, so to ensure a sustained and stable research focus. To meet this recommendation, we are focussing on acquiring more longer-term funding, including NWO Gravitation, National Growth Fund, and the National Roadmap for Large-scale Research Facilities.

Balance fundamental vs. applied research: Given our activities and collaborations on the applied side of computer science research (for which funding is relatively abundant), the committee advised to balance this by supporting fundamental research, e.g., by means of university budget funding. In

response, we have had various staff meetings to prioritise new fundamental research directions and will hire using university funding in these prioritised areas, which include Formal Methods, Software, Algorithms and Systems. Also, the new governmental Sector Plan investments in computer science will allow us to further invest in foundational research in computer systems, AI and data science.

Research support: The committee recommended hiring more technicians, programmers, and administrative staff to help our researchers. Following up on this recommendation, we have started an active taskforce to investigate broadly which support positions are mostly needed and will hire accordingly. Currently, we are also seeking external advice on how we can streamline management and services at the department, given current growing pains.

UvA-VU collaboration: The committee urged us to continue close collaborations between VU and UvA in the Amsterdam area so to coordinate mutual research and education and to avoid unnecessary competition of students and staff. In response to this point, we maintain close contacts and have regular joint management team meetings with the UvA to align our activities and create synergy between the departments. Although both departments are expanding their research remits resulting from increasing research staff, the longstanding policy to avoid overlap in research focus is still pursued actively.

Gender balance: The committee noted that the gender balance has not improved in 2015-2020 and needs ongoing attention and new ideas. To better this situation, we are actively scouting for female staff in all scientific areas and are routinely deploying specialised recruiters with social media expertise to identify and attract them. A special strategy is recruiting qualified part-time female personnel working outside traditional university settings, such as in other public sectors or companies. Recently, we appointed a part-time female professor and had a first part-time female hire (at UHD level) with a background in industry. Together with the faculty and central university we are further pursuing the establishment of a special female professor chair, which will allow us to recruit externally. Since 2005 the VU has the Fenny Diemer-Lindeboom chair, but this is for internal female professor appointments only.

Annual surplus: The committee recommended the department negotiates a policy with the university, where the annual surplus made is not automatically returned to the university after the fiscal year but can be used for longer term development. The committee further advised, regarding staff members with left-over money at the end of the year, to enable them to keep these funds such that they can do their own strategic investments. In reply to this recommendation, we have petitioned the faculty again on this point. However, the policy regarding annual surpluses has been negotiated university-wide in 2013, and central university is not in a position to change and relax these constraints due to financial requirements pertaining to building and extending the university campus. It is therefore not in our capacity to effect changes regarding unspent funds at the end of the fiscal year.

Start-up package: The committee advised the department to increase the start-up package for new staff given the strained recruitment market. We have followed up on this advice already by doubling the provision of PhD students and are looking for more ways to improve the start-up package. Regarding non-scientific facilities, we have improved the relocation allowance, and now provide a refurbishment allowance in addition to relocation cost reimbursement.

We hope this reaction will meet the expectations of the committee and we look forward to a next research visitation, as these are instrumental in reflecting on our research efforts and improving our research output. Finally, we highly value the national level at which the evaluation has taken place, which provides a very helpful overview of the Dutch field, informs on best practices, and allows us to reflect on our scientific research endeavours using a national perspective.

Jaap Heringa
Head, Department of Computer Science, VU