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**Statement Executive Board  
regarding the research review of Anthropology**

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Subject: statement Executive Board regarding the research review of Anthropology

The Executive Board of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam has received and considered the final report of the evaluation of the research program *Mobilities, Belonging and Beliefs: Confronting Global Inequalities and Insecurities* (MOBB). This assessment covering the research of the period 2013-2018 was conducted in the context of the Standard Evaluation Protocol (SEP) 2015-2021. A self-evaluation report written by the research unit, together with interviews by an international peer review committee carried out in September 2020, formed the basis of the assessment.

The Executive Board appreciates the thorough and careful assessment of the committee and is pleased that the quality, relevance to society and the viability of the unit are all assessed as 'very good', meaning that the unit conducts very good, internationally recognised research, makes a very good contribution to society and is very well equipped for the future.

The Executive Board received a written response to the assessment report from the department of Social and Cultural Anthropology. Together with the conclusions and recommendations in the report this was discussed in a meeting with the faculty (the Dean, The Dean of Research, Head of Department, Research Director of Department). Some of the topics discussed were improving the visibility of MOBB, strategic choices for the future, improving PhD completion, and national collaboration on the PhD training program. In the appendix the department describes how it will make or already is making improvements. The Executive Board supports the faculty in pursuing their strategic goals and in their efforts of enhancing the quality and relevance of the research even further.

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

Yours sincerely,

On behalf of the Executive Board



prof. dr. V. Subramaniam,  
rector magnificus

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## Response to the MOBB review and action plan for 2021-2024 25 February 2021

Mobilities, Beliefs, and Belonging: Confronting Global Inequalities and Insecurities (MOBB) provides a productive framework for the research in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Mobility is about movement, migration, and transformation, but it is also about human activity that shapes and is shaped by a world in flux. We approach mobility as a conditioning and disciplining process that is also productive and enabling. Mobility also evinces the resilience and inventiveness of people confronted with an ever-changing world, and it is a necessary condition for people to shape their lifeworld. Processes generally referred to as mobility thus engender (new) forms of world-making, making sense of the world and forging new alliances, and developing new practices that reflect new circumstances. Mobility remains an empty concept if we do not take on board various forms of anchoring, rootedness, and place-making in a world that is increasingly 'overheating' by the depletion of natural resources, collapsing urban infrastructures, pollution, and waste problems, and social and political upheaval. We use the notion of world-making to emphasize the relevance of the 'global scale' in understanding social and cultural processes while also showing agency in the 'human-made' character of the world by looking at mobility, belonging, and believing. This research is of great importance for understanding the present world and coping with society's problems.

The national research review Anthropology agreed on the relevance of the MOBB program. It evaluated the quality of the research and the valorisation and viability as "very good." As we will argue below on specific points, we can reasonably agree with the assessment. However, we would like the rate: excellent at the next audit, which is the challenge for the coming period.

Interestingly, most of the review panel's general recommendations apply to all five departments in the Netherlands. These include the need for more self-criticism, the harmful effects of the system of grants on work conditions, worries about careers of junior researchers, the PhD training and timely completion of PhD theses, and more generally, issues of viability, diversity, and the need to consider the effects of Covid-19 on the departmental community and the nature of ethnographic research over the long term. The most pertinent advice is that Dutch anthropologists should work together more. The assessment committee recommends that the training of PhDs be organized in a "national school of anthropology." We should also look more closely at each other's research and value each's specific contributions.

The program assessment process put forward several points that will have to guide the research policy for the coming years in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology. We now go to the discussion of the most critical points of attention.

### *1. Visibility of MOBB*

The praise we received in the previous audit, which covered the period 2008-12, has continued. SCA-VU is a small group of researchers with a solid international reputation and high-impact output. "Overall, the quality of the scientific publications is very good (and certainly exceeds the averages for such a small research group)." Nevertheless, some critical issues were raised about the MOBB thematic, which the committee deemed less visible to the outside world and less distinctive than the previous program (CONSEC, Constructing Human Security in a Globalizing World).

This is a point that we had already noted ourselves in the self-assessment, and the committee now confirmed that. The relative invisibility is caused by the specific route we have chosen. In the past years, we have spread our efforts over different anthropologies. On the one hand, these are the

theoretical and ethnographic studies that fit into the MOBB program and are MOBB constituents. On the other hand, we are increasingly working in the field of applying anthropology. Here, our ethnographic and more theoretical work essentially involved with research participants and societal stakeholders. We think that the resulting dispersion may cause the fact that the "brand identity" MOBB is less a name in the scientific world than CONSEC, which had an academic focus only. We expect that publishing the "Kinesis" collection of papers currently in progress will be an excellent way to coin MOBB internationally. Kinesis focuses on the 'the making' of our contemporary world through the mediation and moving of people between different social networks, bringing in their life histories and cultural luggage in each one. Kinesis grasps the dynamic nature of human existence in the contemporary world. The stasis that COVID-19 imposes on us further emphasises the power of kinesis. MOBB researchers collectively write contributions to this publication, which was already accepted as a special issue with HUA Journal of Ethnographic Theory and posterior publication as an edited volume with Chicago University Press.

Within the Netherlands, a possible lack of profile is not an issue. In the landscape of Dutch anthropology, it is precisely the track of applying anthropology that distinguishes us from other departments. However, we still need to establish and exploit this reputation better to make it a compelling selling point both internationally and domestically. Applying anthropology is an asset, but we need to show it. In the coming months, a team of MOBB researchers will develop a strategy to establish Applying Anthropology as a MOBB brand and to bundle the many activities that are now sometimes scattered into a unified and selling trademark.

## *2. Engagement MOBB researchers*

If MOBB is not sufficiently visible, this is also because it is not adequately part of our self-identification. We expect that small adjustments in departmental habits can already make a difference in this regard. The monthly research seminar has been called MOBB research seminar for some months now. We will also link the research program more explicitly in our communications on Facebook, our blog StandplaatsWereld and other collective communications. When we revive our acclaimed lecture series AALS (Amsterdam Anthropology Lecture Series), which was temporarily discontinued during the first Corona lockdown, we will also market it as a MOBB activity. We should also mention MOBB in our publications. With such simple adjustments, we are developing a clear strategy to become more visible and reach a wider audience as a research group and department, as recommended in the review report.

More engagement with the MOBB activities will also have a far more critical effect than more substantial visibility: we expect that research quality improves when exchanging more, collaborating more, and learning together. We see MOBB as a program that has grown organically, but it needs to be nurtured. In a small research group, radical innovation depends on new staff being recruited or (more exceptionally) existing staff moving on to a new topic. With the introduction of monthly reading groups in which senior researchers and juniors discuss texts together, we make a positive contribution to researchers' commitment and dedication to the MOBB research community. An annual MOBB week (first edition planned for June 2021) will focus both internal and external attention on the research.

## *3. Position of junior researchers*

The review committee asks attention to junior researchers' precarious position in the current system (e.g., only research positions with external funding). Generally, there is concern that grants are increasingly used as a criterion to measure excellent research, although grants are a means to do research and should not be an end in themselves. We share these concerns with the committee. For

all researchers, the actual research time has decreased in recent years. Senior as well as junior researchers depend on external funds to do their research. However, for young scholars without a permanent position, these facts weigh more heavily than for those who have already been able to do much research and have built up a network and a reservoir of research material, as it were. Recently, some measures have been taken in the faculty to improve the problematic situation of researchers. The teaching load has been lightened somewhat for many researchers as junior lecturers have taken over part of the anthropology instruction. Moreover, there is an arrangement for new assistant professors whereby they receive 0.5 fte research time during the first two years of their appointment instead of the 0.3 fte that is the standard. This creates time to focus more on setting up their own research line and acquiring external funding.

We are aware that a structural shortage of time and money for research causes stress for researchers at the beginning of their careers. Within the MOBB research group, we create a supportive and stimulating collegial atmosphere, where we read each other's applications, comment on articles or create buddy/coach relationships. However, such measures can only partly alleviate the precarious situation of academics starting their careers at universities. Moreover, for a large group of graduates, there is no such perspective, and we must help create a view of the future for them as well. We will recommend that our PhD students take the courses GSSS offers to prepare the PhD students for life after the dissertation. For more about the PhD policy, see 4.

#### 4. *PhDs*

Concerning PhD students, the reviewers encourage MOBB to continue attracting external PhD students. However, the committee "expects the department to make more concrete steps" to reduce the time spent to finish a PhD. We shared this concern and had already set ourselves the task to take measures to make it possible to complete a PhD within four years. According to the committee, finishing in four years is a major challenge for good anthropological research. It forces us to make strategic choices about compulsory courses and requirements. The committee makes a few suggestions we plan to follow, such as organizing more peer-to-peer activities. The activities to stimulate involvement mentioned under 2 above are expressly also intended for PhD students.

The committee expressed concern about the absence of anthropological subjects in the curriculum of the faculty graduate school. Since this is also the case in the other Dutch anthropology departments, they suggest a national graduate school for Anthropology. In the meantime, we are in discussion with colleagues in the Netherlands (the Anthropology.NL group that we formed as a result of the review process) to see if we can offer some "anthropology core" courses together, for instance, on a rotational basis. It is expressly not the intention to replace the faculty research school GSSS. However, we want to contribute to a national anthropology community with a local home that is a stimulating environment for our PhDs.

In the department, we are developing a structured support system for the PhD students, including an "annual consultation" – good talk – with the department Research Director, where any obstacles can be identified in time and to incentive good rapport between PhDs and other researchers. These talks are a concrete expression of the department's intention to create a home for external PhD students for whom there are few facilities where they can write their dissertation within a reasonable period. The individual meetings are in addition to the 3-monthly meeting of the group of PhD students with SCA Head of Department and Research Director. Such measures should take explicit account of the large number of "self-financing" and "external" PhD students, who usually take more than four years to complete their dissertations.

## 5. *Diversity*

The report mentions that the faculty and department do not have a diversity policy and gives the instruction to promote ethnic diversity and write down a diversity plan (page 24). Furthermore, we should take further action to promote a more gender-balanced environment, raise greater awareness and improve knowledge of discriminatory mechanisms. This text about diversity in the reviewers' report probably results from a short misunderstanding during the site visit interview. Fortunately, a diversity policy already exists in the VU and FSW faculty, and the documents the comity refers to are in place. Nevertheless, diversity must remain a point of attention. Since the self-study was written, the situation improved, but both gender balance and staff rejuvenation are yet to be completed. In new hires, we will always take diversity considerations into account. Moreover, diversity and decolonizing the university are topics that we regularly discuss in collegial meetings and with our students.

## 6. *Future of MOBB*

We expect that intense attention to the above points will improve our results and reputation and bring an "excellent" rating in the next review in sight.

Complementing the issues presented above, the following topics merit mention:

- We are encouraged to strengthen our affiliation with faculty and university research groups such as ISR (Institute for Societal Resilience at FSW) and ASI (Amsterdam Sustainability Institute) from the point of view of institutional viability. The ISR lab "Infrastructure, Sustainability and Commons" and participation of MOBB researchers in ASI are already put in place and hopefully contribute to establishing a firm position of the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology in the research of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.
- The panel strongly recommends we join forces with other anthropology groups in the Netherlands, as we need a (shared) strategy for the future in light of the eroding funding structures. The anthropology department of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam took the initiative to organize Anthropology NL and evaluate the needs and possibilities of national courses for PhD students. Other projects will follow.
- Concerning the programmatic content of MOBB, the review panel is positive about our plans to maintain the research program for another 3-5 years. However, they add that it is just as important to be flexible and open to new opportunities and approaches as to maintain MOBB. In December 2020, we discussed the substantive direction of MOBB in the department. The outcome of the conversation is that we recognize the program's importance and want to continue with it as an inspiration, not as a straitjacket (which it never was). Staff agreed there is sufficient cohesion and adjustment options for new colleagues and integration of developments in the field because the connection lies at the meta-level. Efforts will be in making the program function better: We intend to involve our PhDs more, organize a MOBB week, and joint reading and writing projects. The program and research practice in the department will contribute to a leading role in the faculty of Social Sciences, Dutch Anthropology, and the international academic community.