

RESEARCH REVIEW

Organization & Processes of Organizing in
Society

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

2013-2018

ONDERZOEKERIJ

De Onderzoekerij
Vondellaan 58
2332 AH Leiden

Phone: +31 6 24812176

Email: info@onderzoekerij.nl

Internet: www.onderzoekerij.nl



Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Preface | 4 |
| 1. Introduction | 5 |
| 1.1 <i>Terms of reference for the assessment</i> | 5 |
| 1.2 <i>The committee</i> | 5 |
| 1.3 <i>Procedures followed by the committee</i> | 5 |
| 2. Organisation, strategy and targets | 6 |
| 3. Assessment of the research | 7 |
| 3.1 <i>Quantitative assessment</i> | 7 |
| 3.2 <i>Research quality</i> | 7 |
| 3.3 <i>Societal relevance</i> | 8 |
| 3.4 <i>Viability</i> | 8 |
| 3.5 <i>PhD programme</i> | 10 |
| 3.6 <i>Research integrity</i> | 11 |
| 3.7 <i>Diversity</i> | 11 |
| 4. Recommendations | 11 |
| Appendix A - Programme of the site visit | 13 |
| Appendix B - Tables | 14 |
| Appendix C – Meaning of the scores | 15 |



Preface

This report contains the assessment by the external review committee of Organization & Processes of Organizing in Society (OPOS) at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU Amsterdam). On behalf of the committee, I would like to express my gratitude for the warm welcome we received, despite the obvious constraints due to the online nature of proceedings. The colleagues we met and interviewed for the assessment were fully engaged with the process and answered our questions in a frank and constructive manner. The scheduling of the meetings was excellent and seamless, and we appreciate the organisation that went on to achieve this. Without the full and willing engagement of those we interviewed our work would not have produced the insights we feel have been made, and through this report share with OPOS in the spirit of constructive critique. This spirit of open scientific and intellectual engagement we found is in itself a mark of the quality and stability of programme's environment. We hope that our assessment provides a useful pause for thought about how to tackle the challenges of the future.

Prof Simon Down, Chair of the Committee



1. Introduction

1.1 Terms of reference for the assessment

The quality assessment of research of Organization & Processes of Organizing in Society (OPOS) is carried out in the context of the assessment system as specified in the Standard Evaluation Protocol for Public Research Organisations by the Association of Universities in The Netherlands (VSNU), the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW).

The review committee (hereafter the committee) was asked to assess the scientific quality and the relevance and utility to society of the research conducted by OPOS of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU Amsterdam) in the reference period 2013-2018, as well as its strategic targets and the extent to which it is equipped to achieve them.

Accordingly, three main criteria are considered in the assessment: research quality, relevance to society, and viability. In addition, the assessment considers three further aspects: the PhD training programme, research integrity, and diversity.

This report describes findings, conclusions, and recommendations of this external assessment of OPOS.

1.2 The committee

The Board of VU Amsterdam appointed the following members of the committee for the research review:

- Prof. dr. Simon Down, University of Birmingham (Chair of the committee);
- Prof. dr. Yvonne Benschop, Radboud University;
- Prof. dr. Ella Miron Spektor, INSEAD;
- Prof. dr. Sim Sitkin, Duke University.

The Board of VU Amsterdam appointed dr. Annemarie Venemans of De Onderzoekerij as the committee secretary. All members of the committee signed a declaration and disclosure form to ensure that the committee members made their judgements without bias, personal preference or personal interest, and that the judgment was made without undue influence from OPOS or stakeholders.

1.3 Procedures followed by the committee

Prior to the online visit, the committee received detailed documentation comprising the self-assessment report of OPOS, key publications and the Standard Evaluation Protocol (SEP) 2015-2021.

The committee proceeded according to the SEP. The assessment was based on the documentation provided by the research programme and the interviews with the management, a selection of researchers of the programme, and PhD students. The online interviews took place on 3 and 4 November 2020 (see Appendix A).

The committee discussed its assessment at its final session during the site visit. The members of the committee commented by email on the draft report. The draft version was then presented to OPOS for factual corrections and comments. Subsequently, the text was finalised and presented to the Board of VU Amsterdam.



2. Organisation, strategy and targets

Organization & Processes of Organizing in Society (OPOS) is the research programme of the Department of Organization Sciences (ORG) within the Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS) at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU Amsterdam).

The programme has undertaken research and instructional topics on processes of organising in a society of organisations that are important both scientifically and in terms of societal practice. Such a focus inevitably involves an array of intertwined-but-distinct streams of work, with a number of individual staff members involved in more than one stream. This can provide a rich intellectual environment but can also be confusing unless it is well conceived and organised. Admirably, OPOS has worked hard to create a structure that reflects its core mission and themes, while also supporting distinct clusters of activity. The committee will describe how they have organised to take advantage of their strengths and interests, while also fostering focused attention and efforts.

OPOS has focused the group's research around two themes that helped to clarify opportunities for synergy across four research application groups (three clusters were expanded to four in 2018). More specifically, from 2013-2017 OPOS consisted of three research groups or clusters of research: Organizational Behavior, Organizational Ethnography and Organizational Networks. Since 2018, OPOS consists of four research clusters. The Organizational Network cluster has been relabelled into Organization Theory and the cluster Organizational Change and Resilience cluster in has been added. In the period 2013-2018 the programme focused on two key themes: a) increasing organisational interdependence, and b) (in)stability. OPOS' researchers are particularly active in four specific contexts: health care, higher education, crisis management, and public and private partnerships constitute the areas of excellence.

The committee perceived that the two overarching themes operate well as levers for the research and discussions within OPOS. The committee noted the common sense of purpose that at the same time included sufficient freedom for individual creativity and productivity. The committee also observed that there appeared to be effective multi-disciplinary communication within and across the research clusters and contributions to the programme's research. Research group cohesion seems in general strong and a good balance is maintained between focus and breadth.

The committee saw that OPOS can capitalise on its unique position as an organisation science group in a social sciences institutional environment. Its strategy to address problems at the intersection of organisational and societal agendas allows for science for science and science for society contributions both.



3. Assessment of the research

3.1 Quantitative assessment

The committee assessed the quality, societal relevance and viability of OPOS both quantitatively and qualitatively. Its PhD programme, research integrity and diversity are assessed qualitatively. For the quantitative assessment a four-point scale is used, according to the standard evaluation protocol 2015-2021. The explanation of the criteria underlying the scores can be found in appendix C. The qualitative assessment of OPOS can be found in the next sections.

Given the standards laid down in the SEP, the committee has awarded the following scores to the programme:

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Research quality: | 2 |
| Relevance to society: | 1 |
| Viability: | 2 |

3.2 Research quality

OPOS is a well-established research programme producing high quality and impactful research in the organisation sciences. The committee's assessment of the specific work submitted for specific scrutiny is that it is of high quality, publishing its research in key journals in the field.

OPOS's key distinctive feature is the seriousness of the commitment to societal impact, and this inevitably influences the general orientation and overall quality level of academic outputs. The committee therefore assesses the overall quality of the research outputs, reflecting on the impact orientation of the programme and its researchers.

Creating impactful research requires time and effort much of which is not costed in grant funding or recognised in workload models. Specifically, therefore, the volume of world leading publications produced by the programme is consciously constrained by commitments to contribute to impactful research in specific 'field' domains. Many of these areas of organisational life are served by 'field'-specific journals which, in the main, do not rank quite as highly as those journals which emphasise universal theoretical contributions. OPOS is explicit in its commitment to maintaining a broad-based range of research outputs serving the various needs of its stakeholders, and our assessment is that this is commensurate with the overall strategy and orientation of the programme.

From the self-assessment report approximately 45% of the overall scientific outputs are in refereed academic journals. On the assumption that the quality profile of these outputs varies widely (the committee did not receive specific information) there is at the very least evidence that OPOS should examine the overall distribution of quality in refereed and other research outputs. Thus, the committee feels that there are opportunities for OPOS to create greater scientific impact at the highest quality levels by reviewing the proportions of different forms of research outputs, and beginning a conversation about their relative contribution to OPOS as a whole. The committee's view is that the production of scientific outputs is currently largely left for staff to determine, and as a result it is likely that more effort in producing lower quality outputs is currently being made than is necessary or appropriate. OPOS should therefore look to develop a more active conversation about the overall shape and quality of its research outputs.



In terms of funding, both the quantity and quality of the projects funded from external bodies evidenced in the self-assessment is impressive, and such research inputs are a significant confirmation of the quality and impact of the research personnel engaged in such activity in OPOS. Such funding inputs also suggest – given that repeated funding relies on positive evaluation of previous projects – that the projects being funded are well managed and deliver their objectives, including high quality publications, societal impact, and the preparation of the next generation of academics.

3.3 Societal relevance

The committee is of the opinion that OPOS really excels in societal relevance; it is at the very core of their programme.

It would be easy to underestimate the difficulty involved in this achievement. Indeed, such is the degree of embeddedness evident in OPOS's engagement with external parties, it almost seems effortless and natural. It is neither, and clearly reflects years of work with public and private institutions nationally and internationally, building up trust and mutual understanding. As a result, OPOS is extremely well-placed – as the number of very recent funding grants suggest – to continue to grow its national and international reputation for excellence in this area. Research users, and particularly government and EU funders, are increasingly looking to university researchers to co-partner with external stakeholders, and OPOS is clearly a leading player in this area. OPOS's excellence is also reflected in the degree to which civil society organisations are both engaged with (as research partners in consortia) and commissioned research (i.e. contract research).

The relevance of the research is also evident in the range of professional and general public publications in many different spheres of influence and different industrial, governmental and educational sectors. This is an important aspect of translation, dissemination and ensuring societal relevance.

Overall, the committee felt that it is possible that OPOS might consider placing more effort and resources to exploit its success in terms of better developing its public societal impact narrative. This suggestion is not based on exhaustive evidence presented in the self-evaluation report. Nor has the committee assessed the communication strategies of OPOS in detail. However, the committee did feel that not enough detail of the impacts made was presented in the self-evaluation report, and hence it makes the suggestion that a review of the communication strategies is undertaken. If OPOS does discover opportunities for creating greater impact through improved communication and dissemination with internal and external stakeholders, then it is highly likely that greater use of and engagement with central university media resources is merited.

3.4 Viability

Overall, the committee was impressed with the degree of reflexivity of managerial staff. This has been demonstrated in both the self-evaluation report and in the meetings. Similarly, all the OPOS staff the committee met seemed highly motivated and showed good levels of commitment to the well-understood values of the programme. Also apparent was a mature and pragmatic understanding of the threats and constraints staff faced, and the necessity to plan ahead to ensure OPOS was viable and sustainable in the future.

The evidence presented to the committee showed in particular a managerial team that are aware of the programme's weaknesses and threats it faces, and who were also able to successfully deal with such problems. The committee was impressed by this level of thoughtfulness and competence, and it suggests that the university should have great confidence in the programme's ability to manage its own



affairs and for the programme's future viability. Clearly, for example, some serious thought and managerial action has been applied to the issue of succession, following the recognition of the upcoming retirement of senior staff. The committee was impressed with the success achieved in dealing with this problem, and, at the same time, recognized how this is a positive begin to address a diversity imbalance.

Through the self-evaluation (particularly the SWOT analysis) and in the meetings, there is evidence to suggest that there have been net increases in the proportion of effort taken by teaching and administrative task in OPOS. This obviously has the potential to encroach upon the research mission if not managed carefully. The underlying reasons for this seem to be a decline in staffing levels, an increase in student numbers and a decline in the level of direct government research funding allocated from central university funds. OPOS has responded well to these changes by increasing the volume of its external research funding. However, there is some evidence of increased work intensification and work stress in the committee's assessment, and therefore the committee feels that robust conversations need to be had with senior managers in the university to ensure that a negative tipping point is avoided in terms of the continuing viability of OPOS. To be clear, if staff perceive work levels to be intensifying despite continuing high performance in generating quality research, there is a concern among the committee that the best staff may begin to seek work in better funded and less stressful research environments.

Moreover, there is also some evidence of a shift to a greater proportion of contract/consultancy research. Whilst this is also a successful outcome of effort to diversify external income generation, it also potentially represents a threat to the scientific focus of OPOS. Thus, OPOS should ensure that consultancy contracts are continually monitored to ensure that they continue to facilitate core research objectives. The committee is confident that this is the case, and was impressed at the explanations given about how such contracts were mobilised to produce both impact and high-quality research.

The committee nevertheless feels that managers of OPOS might consider developing clearer management information regarding external income generation. So, whilst a stated strategic aim is to consider where to apply for funding, the committee feels that greater understanding of average values and 'hit' rates of the different proportions of types of research income annually (and, say, over three- and five-year periods), would facilitate greater confidence in making decisions about funding strategy. Based on its assessment, the committee also feels that OPOS might further develop opportunities for collaboration with exact sciences and industry, whilst ensuring that scientific focus is not dissipated.

Allied to this is evidence of bunching in the awarding of research grants, with particular individuals or groups being more successful than others. This is perfectly normal, but it does present a challenge to managers since they need to ensure that those that are winning awards are suitably supported. The committee feels that OPOS should review the efficacy of funding support and in particular the post-award administrative and workload support provided to PIs and project teams in the delivery of projects. OPOS might also realise an opportunity to have a greater proportion of staff engaged in funded projects and in applying for funded research by reviewing how best practice in this area is shared. Managers might also consider if workload incentives currently match strategic objective in this area.

The committee agrees that the overall strategic objectives outlined in the self-evaluation, and articulated over the various meetings are consistent with maintaining future viability of OPOS. There was a good deal of evidence that local and university policies, procedures and operational practices will help to some extent in enhancing viability and increases in quality. However, taken as a whole the committee identified a number of core areas for improvement of the research strategy. Notably these concern management information about funding, quality of research output, promotion criteria and workload allocation, that would benefit from greater formal certainty, transparency and predictability.



This request to introduce greater formality in certain areas, the committee is at pains to stress, does not mean that there should be any shift toward managerialism. This would be very counter-productive, and undermine the benefits that OPOS gains from the perceived climate of informality. However, the committee feels that OPOS should review its policies, procedures and operational practices in key areas to ensure greater transparency. Specifically, OPOS staff have expressed a desire for more transparency and predictability, and any review should fully engage with staff broadly to ascertain key areas for development.

It is also evident that although managers in OPOS have made some significant positive shifts in formalising and clarifying expectations (especially around promotion, diversity and inclusion), the felt experience for staff is somewhat less clear and predictable. Hence, the committee feels that managers need to redouble their communication of the new structures and initiatives. Junior staff, for instance perceived the recently introduced promotion criteria as dispiriting, because they perceived that one had to be a ‘unicorn’ to meet the ‘hard’ criteria required. Regardless of the accuracy of these claims, junior staff feel that how the ‘hard’ criteria are actually applied in promotion decisions are unclear. There is a feeling that it is impossible for anyone to actually achieve the espoused criteria. At the very least this suggests that managers should review promotion criteria and how they are communicated to staff.

The committee was impressed at the emerging internal coherence for the ‘homes’ of the research clusters. Whilst some clusters are inevitably more buoyant than others, good progress is clearly being made. The committee recommends, however, that some thought might be given to how the wide range of OPOS’s external stakeholders might better understand this internal organisational structure. At the very least an internal conversation should be had as to the opportunities that might be had in leveraging this internal coherence to get great external recognition.

The annual university budgeting cycle was noted as creating management issues for OPOS and the Faculty. Whilst OPOS staff recognised that recent Faculty flexibility initiatives in this regard had gone some way to mitigating the problem of having to rush to spend more resource in year than was optimum in relation actual strategic need (or lose the resource), the issue continued to skew managerial decision-making at OPOS. The committee is not aware of the seriousness of this issue, and understands that this is also a university wide issue. But at the very least senior management conversations could be had to see what can be done.

3.5 PhD programme

Based on the committee’s analysis of the self-evaluation and from the meetings with students and staff the PhD programme reflects the standards elsewhere in the overall OPOS programme. The committee found strong scientific foundations, a strong sense of community and institutional support, dedication to effective instruction, highly socially relevant research, and successful outcomes. The level of throughput is good, and this suggests that students make good progress. The committee recognises that OPOS introduced an unambiguous go/no-go decision that comes after eight months, and this is clearly a positive initiative, reducing the length that under-performing students remain enrolled.

The committee was impressed overall by the degree to which the students it engaged with in their meeting were connected to, identified with and understood the values of the OPOS programme. However, there was also some evidence that students felt somewhat confused and in need of some emotional support. This was articulated in the context of broader ‘wicked’ problems in the higher education context (problems that are difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements), rather than anything specific to OPOS. However, there was concern expressed regarding students’ future career prospects and the degree of competition in



securing academic positions. The tension between working on the thesis and the pressure to publish in order to secure a job was noted, and whilst there was a degree on maturity and pragmatism in the attitudes of the students, the panel feels that OPOS should engage in a broader conversation with PhD students to see if there is a desire for more support with publication development, and other potential needs.

The open-plan office space provided for PhD students was also mentioned as a negative aspect of the overall experience, and, post-Covid, in any needs-analysis process that follows this assessment OPOS managers should investigate how the PhD space is and isn't used.

3.6 Research integrity

In the self-evaluation and more generally from our meetings it is clear that OPOS takes research integrity as seriously as it does its generally ethical orientation to the purpose of research for society. The committee was particularly impressed with the commitment to developing open science practices in pre-registration and data accessibility. Overall, it saw no evidence of practices or policies that would undermine research integrity.

3.7 Diversity

Overall, the committee is satisfied that the managers of OPOS and the faculty are aware of the importance of diversity, and the opportunities it can bring when managed appropriately.

The self-evaluation report discussed the diversity of the programme staff, and highlighted some areas of concern. The measures discussed in the report and elaborated in the committee's meetings suggest that OPOS has responded well to the lack of gender balance in the programme and is well positioned to turn the current imbalance at the higher level around in the future. The remaining challenges are to ensure that the influx of new female staff are included in all aspects of programme's activity equally so as to ensure equality of opportunity, and to ensure that diversity and inclusion considerations weigh in promotion from assistant to associate and from associate to full professor.

Another issue raised in the meetings was the impact of increasing levels of international staff who do not speak Dutch. Given the level of national funded research conducted this does indeed represent a potentially significant resourcing issue, such that the pool of existing staff who might benefit from working on funded projects is smaller than it would be without the increase of international staff. Another aspect of this is that because the curriculum is not all delivered in English, there is a potential for Dutch nationals to face proportionally more pressure to deliver teaching and for others to be sidelined. Clearly, the extent of this issue should be assessed by managers. The committee feels that this is another example of the need for greater transparency, predictability and formal certainty around workload issues. It also feels that the changing composition of the staff spurs managerial attention for inclusion of all staff members to ensure that all can thrive in an inclusive environment.

4. Recommendations

The committee is convinced, as noted above, that the programme has made a number of important steps in the past six years. It also sees little by way of structural problems that stand in the way of a strong future. Most of its recommendations, then, aim to help OPOS expand upon and consolidate its recent gains.



- OPOS and senior Faculty managers should ensure that university managers who allocate higher-level budgeting targets or parameters to OPOS should be aware for the outstanding nature of the successes of the programme and seek to ensure that further work intensification in the proportion of teaching and administrative tasks are avoided;
- Review internal and external messaging around the impact of OPOS research. It may be possible that more effective communication of OPOS's achievements is needed;
- Explore the possibility of more effective measurement of societal impact;
- In collaboration with staff OPOS should review its policies, procedures and operational practices in key areas – workloads, promotion, etc. - to ensure greater transparency, predictability and formal certainty;
- OPOS should review the efficacy of funding support and in particular the post-award administrative and workload support provided to PIs and project teams in the delivery of projects;
- Introduce more managerial scrutiny of the proportions of research output production, and provide greater incentives:
- Increase the proportion of higher ranked outputs;
- Reduce the volume of lower quality outputs;
- Engage with PhD cohort to assess needs, particularly related to pre-career support (i.e. publication development), and workspace quality;
- Managers should review the criteria and process for promotion and its understanding by staff;
- Managers should set goals and monitor progress of diversity and inclusion of women and/or international staff in the higher ranks (associate and full professor);
- Managers should stimulate an inclusive environment in which all needs for uniqueness and belongingness are met;
- Faculty managers should seek to assess the impact - for OPOS and elsewhere - of university annual funding budgeting cycles. There are costs associated with spending budget because it needs to be spent before university deadlines, and such spending can act as a drag or obstacle in attaining longer-term strategic objectives. Depending on the significance of the problem Faculty managers should look at ways of reducing the negative impact.



Appendix A - Programme of the site visit

Tuesday November 3

| Time | Part |
|---------------|---------------------------|
| 14.00 – 17.00 | Preliminary meeting panel |
| 17.00 – 17.45 | Meeting PhD students |
| 17.45 – 18.15 | Evaluation panel |

Wednesday November 4

| Time | Part |
|---------------|--|
| 12.30 – 13.00 | Preparatory meeting panel |
| 13.00 – 13.40 | Management meeting |
| 13.40 – 13.50 | break |
| 13.50 – 14.30 | Junior staff meeting |
| 14.30 – 15.00 | Evaluation and break |
| 15.00 – 15.50 | Senior staff meeting |
| 15.50 – 16.30 | Break and preparing questions management |
| 16.30 – 17.00 | 2nd Management meeting |
| 17.00 – 18.45 | Evaluation panel |
| 18.45 – 19.00 | Presentation first findings |



Appendix B - Tables

Table 1 Research staff in fte

| | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 |
|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Scientific staff | 7.62 | 6.37 | 8.48 | 5.61 | 6.13 | 8.52 |
| Post-docs | 7.09 | 7.55 | 4.72 | 2.47 | 3.06 | 1.95 |
| PhD students | 5.73 | 2.97 | 8.62 | 10.87 | 6.60 | 8.25 |
| Total research staff | 20.44 | 16.89 | 21.82 | 18.95 | 15.79 | 18.72 |

Table 2 Funding

| | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 |
|-----------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| <i>Funding in FTE</i> | | | | | | |
| Direct funding | 14.99 | 13.52 | 12.05 | 11.72 | 7.60 | 8.00 |
| Research grants | 2.98 | 2.45 | 7.65 | 4.73 | 3.19 | 5.60 |
| Contract research | 2.47 | 0.92 | 2.12 | 2.50 | 5.00 | 5.12 |
| Total funding | 20.44 | 16.89 | 21.82 | 15.79 | 15.79 | 18.72 |



Appendix C – Meaning of the scores

| Category | Meaning | Research quality | Relevance to society | Viability |
|----------|-----------------------------|---|--|---|
| 1 | World leading/ excellent | The research unit has been shown to be one of the few most influential research groups in the world in its particular field | The research unit makes an outstanding contribution to society | The research unit is excellently equipped for the future |
| 2 | Very good | The research unit conducts very good, internationally recognised research | The research unit makes a very good contribution to society | The research unit is very well equipped for the future |
| 3 | Good | The research unit conducts good research | The research unit makes a good contribution to society | The research unit makes responsible strategic decisions and is therefore well equipped for the future |
| 4 | Unsatisfactory | The research unit does not achieve satisfactory results in its field | The research unit does not make a satisfactory contribution to society | The research unit is not adequately equipped for the future |

