# RESEARCH REVIEW

# Pedagogical and Educational Sciences

# 2018-2023

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# Contents

# Preface

What good research is and how it can be brought about is an open and complex question. It is a question that must be answered by individual researchers, research groups, research programmes, research institutes, faculties, and universities. Answers to the questions are diverse as disciplines and research fields are diverse. Answers evolve over time and contexts make answers more or less suitable. Given the open and complex nature there are no right or wrongs answers although some answers are better and others are worse. Sharing these answers and subjecting them to critical scrutiny in a research assessment exercise is an act of research maturity, despite the vulnerability it may entail.

This document reflects the outcomes of such a research assessment exercise. The report adheres to the guidelines of the Strategy Evaluation Protocol (2021-2027) published under the authority of the Universities of the Netherlands (UNL), the Dutch Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW). The research assessment focused on the fields of Pedagogical Sciences and Educational Sciences. In addition to the Interuniversity Centre for Educational Sciences (ICO), research programmes, institutes and/or faculties from the following universities participated in the assessment and shared their answers through self-reports: the University of Amsterdam, University of Groningen, Leiden University, Maastricht University, the Open Universiteit of the Netherlands, Erasmus University Rotterdam, and Utrecht University. Self-reports from these institutions were discussed with a review committee comprising scholars from diverse research backgrounds and countries, along with two PhD candidates. The entire process was organised and supported by De Onderzoekerij.

It was my privilege to chair the committee's activities. I extend my gratitude to my fellow committee members for the interesting and open discussions on research, particularly in the fields of pedagogical and educational sciences, as well as for their extensive reading and writing efforts, their dedication and their good spirit. The support by De Onderzoekerij was invaluable. Esther Poort coordinated the entire exercise and, together with Annemarie Venemans, served as secretary during the discussions. Together they also assisted in the elaboration and editing of this report. But importantly, I thank the management, senior and junior staff members as well as the PhD candidates of the participating institutions for all the preparatory work and the candid and open discussions which provided insights and demonstrated a strong commitment to high-quality pedagogical and educational research. This report reflects their answers on what constitutes good research and how it can be brought about, along with our reflections. I hope this report can further strengthen the high quality of research in pedagogical science and educational sciences in the Netherlands.

Jan Elen

Chair of the Committee

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Terms of reference for the assessment

The quality assessment of research in pedagogical sciences and educational sciences is carried out in the context of the Standard Evaluation Protocol for public research organisations by the Universities of the Netherlands (UNL)), the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW).

The Committee was asked to assess the scientific quality and the relevance and utility to society of the research conducted by research institutes of eight universities in the reference period 2017-2022, as well as its strategic targets and the extent to which it is equipped to achieve them.

The participating research institutes are:

- Freudenthal Institute, Utrecht University
- Nieuwenhuis Institute for Educational Research, University of Groningen
- Department of Education and Pedagogy, Utrecht University
- Faculty of Educational Sciences, Open Universiteit
- Institute of Education and Child Studies, Leiden University
- School of Health Professions Education, Maastricht University
- Research Institute of Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam
- Pedagogical Sciences, Erasmus University Rotterdam
- Interuniversity Centre for Educational Sciences, National research school

Accordingly, three main criteria are considered in the assessment: research quality, relevance to society, and viability. During the evaluation of these criteria, the Committee was asked to incorporate four specific aspects: open science, PhD policy and training, academic culture and human resources policy.

This report describes findings, conclusions and recommendations of this external assessment of the research of pedagogical and educational sciences.

## 1.2 The Review Committee

The Board of the participating universities appointed the following members of the committee for the research review:

- Prof. dr. Jan Elen, KU Leuven, Belgium (chair)
- Prof. dr. Dagmar Strohmeier, Research Centre Linz, Austria
- Em. Prof. dr. Wilma Vollebergh, Utrecht University, Netherlands
- Prof. dr. Roger Säljö, University of Gothenburg, Sweden
- Prof. dr. Jennifer Symonds, University College London, United Kingdom
- Prof dr. Nienke van Atteveldt, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands
- Brittney Root MA (PhD candidate), Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands
- Bob Kapteijns MSc (PhD candidate), Radboud University, Netherlands

The Boards of the participating universities appointed dr. Annemarie Venemans and drs. Esther Poort of De Onderzoekerij as the committee secretaries. 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 the institutes or stakeholders.

## 1.3 Procedures followed by the Committee

The Committee proceeded according to the Strategy Evaluation Protocol (SEP) 2021-2027. The assessment was based on the documentation provided by the eight research programmes and the research school, as well as interviews with four groups of representatives from each programme: the programme's management, selections of senior researchers, selections of junior researchers, and PhD candidate representatives. On Friday, interviews were held with the national research school ICO, including one with the management and one with PhD candidates. Furthermore, a joint interview was conducted with the directors of the eight research programmes and ICO. The interviews took place from February 3 to February 7, 2025 (see Appendix A).

Prior to the site visit, the Committee reviewed comprehensive documentation, including self-evaluation reports from the eight research programmes and the research school, along with their appendices. Additionally, the Committee was presented with a distinct document titled *Pedagogical and Educational Sciences in the Netherlands, Cover note for research evaluation 2018-2023*. This document provided an overview of the Dutch research landscape at universities, including explanations of the funding landscape, the PhD system in the Netherlands, and recent developments in government policies. It also offered insights into the specific domain of pedagogical and educational sciences. Additionally, this document encompasses the findings of a bibliometric analysis, providing insight into the scientific impact and level of societal connectedness of the research units. In line with the qualitative nature of the current research review —focused on evaluating both scientific and societal impact rather than comparing participating institutes—these results were presented collectively for the entire field. The analysis focused on indicators of scientific impact as well as societal connectedness.

The Committee discussed its assessment of each research programme during several sessions of the site visit. The Committee chair had a coordinating role in the writing procedure and delegated the writing of sections to members of the Committee. The members of the Committee commented by email on the draft report. The draft version was then presented to the research programmes for factual corrections and comments. Subsequently, the text was finalised and presented to the Executive Boards of the eight universities.

# 2. General remarks

## 2.1 Introduction

After thoroughly reviewing the meticulously written and edited self-evaluation reports (and their appendices) of eight institutes/faculties/programmes and one research school active in the fields of Pedagogical Sciences and Educational Sciences, the Committee had the privilege of engaging in enriching conversations on research-related issues with the management, PhD candidates, and junior and senior staff members. The Committee reaffirms that the research in Pedagogical and Educational Sciences in the Netherlands is of high quality, often surpassing international standards. The research is diverse, encompassing fundamental and curiosity-driven inquiries on the one hand and applied studies conducted for and/or with societal partners on the other. Despite various contextual challenges, the institutes appear resilient and committed to conducting relevant research at a very high and internationally recognised academic level.

In addition to observations, this report offers recommendations intended to further encourage the strengthening of the excellent work being done.

## 2.2 Research quality

As evidenced in the jointly written cover note and the specific self-evaluation reports, research in pedagogical and educational sciences is impressively broad and diverse. It addresses a wide range of research questions, rooted in various theoretical perspectives and based on a diversity of epistemological assumptions; it employs a broad range of methodological approaches. The research spans the spectrum from theoretical/fundamental to practical/applied, with a noticeable trend towards more practice-based and practice-oriented studies developed in cooperation with external societal partners. This trend is influenced by funding structures and societal demands. Regardless of the research nature, multiple indicators (from traditional citation indices to popular books and widely used tools and guidelines) attest to the quality of the work.

The institutes employ different context-specific strategies to define their research profiles and to align them with initiatives such as the Sector Plan SSH, with decisions arising from ample reflection and deliberate thought. What unites these institutes is their shared approach to science: they investigate relevant questions while maintaining a strong interest in both fundamental insights and practical applications.

While collaboration already exists through various networks, institutes also reflect on whether their current efforts are optimally structured and effective. A stronger, more coordinated collaboration across institutes could help reinforce their collective position and visibility towards policymakers, ensuring that the importance of pedagogical and educational sciences is clearly articulated. Such collaboration does not mean losing individual institutional identities—on the contrary, differentiation and cooperation can coexist. Strengthening connections within the field can support networking, mutual learning, and identity-building while also fostering interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research.

This ongoing dialogue is essential: interdisciplinary collaboration can only thrive when rooted in a strong disciplinary foundation. The Committee encourages institutes to continue refining their collective vision, identifying effective platforms for collaboration (also between pedagogical and educational scientists), and maintaining discussions on the role and positioning of pedagogical and educational sciences in the broader research landscape.

### 2.3 Societal relevance

Research in Pedagogical and Educational Sciences addresses issues that are intrinsically relevant to individuals and societies, presenting advantages as well as methodological challenges. The relevance is easily recognised and made visible, yet the research may also critically examine choices made by individuals and decision-makers. The Committee encourages institutes to reflect on their role with respect to the development of individuals, as well as societies, and to continue enriching the public debate by highlighting scientific insights and findings. Additionally, institutes may combine efforts to reflect on the collective impact of their research on societal issues, and to enhance visibility through collaborative valorisation within shared research themes.

The institutes engage with practice in various ways, including numerous dissemination activities and intensive collaboration with societal partners who may request the investigation of particular research questions and participate in the research. Societal partners can be research users, partners, or co-researchers (e.g., 'external' PhD candidates). In these collaborations, the processes are increasingly valued as much as the research outcomes.

However, while societal relevance is widely acknowledged, a clear overarching strategy on how to approach and enhance it deserves continuous attention. The Committee recommends that each institute further develop its own strategic approach to societal engagement, ensuring balance in their research programmes. This includes defining target audiences, clarifying objectives, considering publishing in Dutch, and identifying effective modes of collaboration to maximise impact.

### 2.4 Viability

The Committee is impressed by the enthusiasm and engagement of junior and senior staff members, as well as PhD candidates. Clearly, conducting research in the reviewed institutes is more than just 'work'; researchers are passionate about their studies, engaged in in-depth analyses and conceptual clarifications, and proactive in sharing both the research process and its outcomes. Together with good research facilities and effective support structures, this provides a solid foundation for future research.

Institutes are aware of challenges related to budget cuts, political decisions, and societal viewpoints that may not always favour research. In response, they recognise the need for strategic choices and acknowledge that some developments may impact their research. One pressing issue is the significant time investment required for grant applications, combined with the low success rates. Within institutes, examples have shown that a more targeted approach—focusing resources on the most promising funding opportunities rather than multiple researchers competing for the same grants—can be more efficient. The Committee recommends exploring whether this principle can be applied more broadly, not only within but also between institutes, to optimise efforts and increase overall success rates.

### 2.5 Academic culture

Discussions with PhD candidates and junior and senior staff members revealed signs of an academic culture that is open, supportive, targeted, and increasingly collaborative. Relationships across generations appear strong, creating an environment where people enjoy their work and feel recognised. This culture fosters intensive academic discussions and high research productivity. It is important to note that such a culture requires deliberate efforts from all involved, as highlighted during and after the COVID-19 period.

Workload is broadly recognised as high, and various measures are taken to manage it. Despite these efforts, some experience workload as work pressure due to high research ambitions and external

funding requirements. The Committee observed a broad recognition of this issue, numerous attempts to reduce pressure, and an openness to discuss it. Increased financial pressures may result in initiatives that disproportionately affect dedicated research time. The Committee recommends that institutes continue to prioritise quality over quantity to alleviate work pressure and safeguard research time. Collaboration, including team science, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research, and exchanging ideas and practices among institutes, is seen as an effective response to these challenges.

During the review period, clear initiatives were taken regarding research integrity and privacy. Open science is embraced by the institutes, with a large majority of publications being 'open access' in various formats, increased preregistration of research initiatives, implemented data management policies, and accessible data sets in repositories for reuse. Ethical review committees have taken a prominent position, and GDPR rules are complied with. While these contributions are significant for scientific integrity, institutes also report challenges, such as the need for more support (e.g., data stewards, data infrastructure), increasing bureaucracy when applying for and implementing research and difficulties in recruiting sufficient research participants. Institutes make important efforts to support their researchers, and it is recommended that they further discuss the implications of integrity and privacy regulations to minimise any potential negative consequences.

### 2.6 Human Resources Policy

During the review period, various human resources-related decisions were made. Thanks to provisions from the Sector Plan SSH, several assistant professors were hired and appointed to permanent positions, contributing to more manageable workloads. It is observed that the tasks and support for assistant professors vary across institutes, with dedicated research time differing significantly.

All institutes are engaged in implementing the recent 'Recognition and Rewards' policy, although the degree of implementation varies across institutes. This policy shifts the focus from primarily quantitative research indicators to a broader evaluation framework that includes qualitative elements, as well as accomplishments in teaching, leadership, and societal impact. The adoption of the policy will support staff in experiencing greater fulfillment in their roles and to achieve their career goals, even in an environment where promotions may be challenging. The Committee is highly positive about this development, as it fosters a more balanced and inclusive approach to academic careers.

While the policy is generally welcomed, especially for its emphasis on a more holistic assessment of academic careers, there are still concerns about its practical implementation. In particular, assistant professors expressed a need for greater transparency regarding promotion criteria and the long-term implications of the policy for career progression. Even at institutes that have made significant progress in implementation, questions remain about how different career tracks will be evaluated in practice. It seems important to develop clear markers of recognition for excellence in teaching or excellent contributions to societal impact and find ways to celebrate these achievements in the same way excellent research is recognised.

The Committee recommends that institutes actively work to build trust in the system’s sustainability and ensure clarity on how different academic profiles—whether focused on research, teaching, leadership, or impact—are defined and assessed. In particular, the role of research within non-research-dominant career tracks should be explicitly addressed to avoid uncertainty about career development opportunities.

### 2.7 PhD candidates

The Committee values the candid discussions with PhD candidates and observes that the group of PhD candidates is large, with a growing number of external PhD candidates. Institutes invest significantly in PhD supervision, with junior and senior staff members dedicating substantial effort.

PhD candidates are in diverse situations depending on their funding sources and the amount of time they can dedicate to research (some full-time, others part-time). While institutes strive to offer similar working conditions for all PhD candidates, trajectories and experiences differ, particularly between internal and external candidates. Required teaching time for internal PhD candidates differs between universities.

PhD projects are intensively supported by supervisory teams, closely monitored according to institutional procedures, and using dedicated tools. This is especially the case for PhD candidates in educational sciences who also are monitored and supported by ICO with positive effects (also on the duration of the trajectory).

PhD trajectories often exceed the predefined four years due to personal circumstances and systemic factors. Some institutes have reconsidered dissertation requirements to make PhD trajectories more realistic, for instance reflecting the particularities of applied research projects. External PhD projects tend to be longer and have higher dropout rates, possibly due to weaker links with the academic culture and/or the combination of research with other pressing obligations. The Committee recommends that institutes re-evaluate how they assess the progress of PhD trajectories, to take into account the time external PhD candidates realistically can devote to research. This evaluation can help institutes align PhD expectations with candidates' specific circumstances. It is further recommended to consider greater standardisation of PhD monitoring systems, by, for example, setting up review panels where senior researchers outside of the supervision team give PhD candidates formative feedback on their work.

PhD candidates receive training in various local graduate schools, including methodological training, open science, scientific integrity, privacy, and professionalisation initiatives for future careers. Some candidates attend discipline-specific courses and connect with other researchers in specific research schools. For PhD candidates in the field of Educational Sciences, ICO plays a crucial and valuable role. The Committee enjoyed conversations with PhD candidates and the management of ICO, which balances setting and monitoring standards with supporting PhD candidates in achieving high-level research ambitions. ICO creates a safe academic community for PhD candidates to exchange research experiences and provide mutual support, clearly enhancing the more general support offered by local graduate schools. Unfortunately, not all PhD candidates in the field have the opportunity to participate in a domain-specific research school like ICO.

### 2.8 Recommendations

To further strengthen research in Pedagogical and Educational Sciences, the Committee suggests the following general recommendations:

- As a group of outstanding research institutes, the ambition should be to continue conversations about future research directions, strengthening collaborations between pedagogical and educational scientists, and fostering the growth of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research.
- Reflect on the role of the institutes towards the development of individuals as well as societies and continue to enrich the public debate by highlighting scientific insights and findings on

current issues/challenges within our society. Combining efforts to valorise the relevance of research in these fields will enhance visibility and impact.

- Continue discussing research priorities across institutes to avoid undesirable competition and wasted effort. Collaborations within the context of sector plan priorities already provide a strong starting point.
- Prioritise quality over quantity to alleviate work pressure and safeguard research time. If this is a shared priority across institutes, the focus on quality versus quantity will not lead to unfair competition.
- Continue developing strategic approaches to societal engagement, ensuring balance in their research programmes. Adequate approaches may imply the definition of target audiences, the clarification of objectives, deliberate publishing in Dutch, and the identification of effective modes of dialogue and collaboration to maximise impact.
- Further discuss the implications of integrity and privacy regulations to mitigate undesirable side effects in research activities.
- In the further implementation of the Recognition and Rewards system, institutes should seek to promote trust in its sustainability and provide clarity on the academic nature of different profiles, specifically the role of research in teaching, leadership, and impact profiles.
- Reconsider progress reporting practices for PhD trajectories, taking into account the time external PhD candidates realistically can devote to their research, ensuring that expectations and monitoring align with their specific circumstances.
- Consider both further standardisation of PhD monitoring systems and the inclusion of external senior researchers in these processes to enrich them.

# 11. Interuniversity Centre for Educational Sciences, National research school

### 11.1: Organisation and strategy

The Interuniversity Centre for Educational Sciences (ICO) is a graduate school and research network, bringing together researchers in the educational sciences from twelve Dutch and two Belgian universities. ICO plays a key role in the training programme of its PhD members by supplementing the general training offered by local graduate schools with more in-depth training in their specific field of research. ICO offers and facilitates training, research support, and networking opportunities for PhD candidates. ICO's three main objectives are: (1) To promote the quality of education for PhD candidates conducting scientific research in the educational sciences; (2) To organise an all-encompassing educational programme; and (3) To stimulate (international) collaboration within the educational sciences.

To achieve the first goal, ICO aims to promote and safeguard the research progress of its PhD members as well as the quality of their supervision at their local universities. The second goal is achieved through a variety of courses, workshops, and Spring School conferences specifically tailored to PhD candidates in the educational sciences. Third, ICO aims to stimulate (international) collaborations by providing broad, high-quality networking opportunities. Overall, ICO aims to provide a solid foundation that complements the general PhD education offered by local graduate schools.

ICO uses three committees to manage the research school: (1) the ICO *governing board* consisting of 14 representatives from each participating university and the chair of the educational committee; (2) the *educational committee* consisting of one or two PhD members from each participating university, which monitors ICO's educational programme and provides solicited and unsolicited advice to the ICO board and directors; and (3) the *scientific committee* and *examinations committee* which oversee the quality and feasibility of PhD projects. ICO has two directors; the scientific director oversees scientific and financial matters, while the educational director manages the educational programme.

### 11.2 ICO educational programme

The ICO educational programme consists of several components. First, ICO offers an Introductory Course (5 ECTS), covering various topics such as research integrity, data management, and open science. Additionally, PhD candidates can choose from a variety of courses (amounting to 9 ECTS). These courses include 'Thematic courses' about recent developments in the field, as well as 'Methodology courses' about various research methods. Full-time PhD candidates need to acquire 18 ECTS in total to complete their training at ICO. In addition to the selection above (14 ECTS), PhD candidates also participate in the ICO International (3 ECTS) or National (1 ECTS) Spring School. Part-time PhD candidates (≤0.8 FTE) are not required to attend the full program; only the Introductory Course and one ICO conference.

The educational programme at ICO is specifically tailored to the PhD candidates' research interests and practical needs, with a focus on the latest developments in educational sciences. The quality of courses is monitored by the PhD members in the educational committee, who review the course manuals of upcoming courses and evaluate the courses after implementation. Most of ICO's courses receive a high average score, with 80% of the courses scoring over 4 on a 5-point Likert scale. In general, the programme emphasises both *fundamental* and *applied* research. This approach enables PhD practitioners with applied backgrounds and research interests (e.g., teachers) to integrate their doctoral

training with their professional practice. The goal is to both advance their practice and contribute to practice-focused research.

In recent years, the ICO programme has become more flexible. PhD members can now choose from a wider range of courses, with some parts of the programme available online. Certain courses are divided into shorter modules, making them more accessible for part-time PhD candidates. This increased flexibility has led to a growing number of part-time PhD candidates enrolling in courses and even completing the full programme. Nevertheless, the Introductory Course still includes two in-person course days to facilitate networking opportunities and to foster a sense of community.

The Committee finds that the PhD candidates highly value the programme's scientific and educational benefits. They particularly appreciate that courses are taught by domain-specific experts from participating universities—an advantage that individual local graduate schools cannot always offer. Moreover, the interviewed PhD candidates were unanimously positive about the networking opportunities at ICO. This was true not only for the PhD candidates interviewed for the ICO review, but also for candidates interviewed for the reviews of the other institutions/universities. Specifically, PhD candidates value the opportunities for networking across sub-disciplines and participating institutions. Additionally, the PhD candidates point out that the Introductory Course and the Spring Schools are especially beneficial for connecting with the other PhD candidates from different universities on a more personal level, while learning about mutual research interests. The PhD candidates believe that the 'community building' aspect of ICO is very important, and they feel included in their own 'ICO cohort'. This is especially true for PhD members from universities where the educational sciences units are relatively small. ICO offers them a sense of 'identity' within a larger community that their local universities cannot provide.

### 11.3 Academic culture

ICO aims to train junior researchers to become responsible scholars. During the Introductory Course, PhD candidates learn about research integrity, data management, and open science, helping them to navigate the international academic culture, with a particular focus on the Netherlands and Belgium.

Moreover, ICO strives to foster openness, (social) safety, and inclusivity, ensuring that PhD candidates receive the support and feedback necessary for their personal and academic development. To achieve this, ICO: (1) hosts PhD conferences (Spring Schools) where candidates can present their work in a supportive environment before participating in larger events; (2) provides access to ICO counsellors for guidance and advice; and (3) administers the ICO Monitor, a confidential survey that gathers feedback on PhD candidates' satisfaction and progress.

At the Spring Schools, candidates present their work and receive feedback in a structured manner: feedback forms are provided for attendees, and candidates are assigned a peer and a more senior ICO member to read their scientific text beforehand and prepare structured feedback. The Committee finds that PhD candidates appreciate this process, reporting this experience as a very productive opportunity to learn in a structured context surrounded by their community of peers and familiar ICO members. Importantly, PhD candidates also experience the benefit of attending courses alongside PhD candidates in educational sciences across different universities.

The ICO counsellor is available for PhD members who encounter difficulties during their projects, such as supervision issues or concerns to ICO courses. The counsellor listens to the concerns of the members and gives advice, and there is also an option for the counsellor to be present with the PhD during meetings with their supervisor(s). The ICO Monitor encourages PhD candidates to reflect on their progress, identify challenges, and discuss concerns with ICO or their supervisors.

### 11.4 Open Science

Like many other matters of scientific integrity and data management, open science practices are primarily the responsibility of the local graduate schools, which means that ICO is not able to exert much influence in this regard. Nevertheless, ICO has included open science principles and practices in its educational programme and monitoring, such as using the ICO monitor to keep track of the PhD candidates' use of (and questions related to) open science. It will be informative to see the developments of the practices among PhD candidates over time. The results of the ICO monitor are also discussed during the board meetings, where all the participating universities are also present.

### 11.5 Human Resources Policy

Beginning PhD candidates (in educational sciences) at any of the participating universities can become a member of ICO, if certain conditions are met. First, the PhD candidate must be employed at an institute participating in ICO, and at least one of the supervisors must be an ICO fellow (with some exceptions). Before becoming an ICO member, the PhD project proposal must be reviewed and approved by the ICO scientific committee. This project proposal also includes a comprehensive training and supervision plan, which outlines the supervisors' time investment, course work schedules, project timelines, and other professional responsibilities, such as teaching.

The review of the project proposal is not intended as a selection procedure, but rather as a check to ensure that projects are both of high quality and feasible, for instance with regard to time investment and/or the required number of participants. While proposals are almost never rejected, they may be temporarily put 'on hold' if clarifications or adjustments are needed. Approximately 25% of all proposals – sometimes even those that are already funded by grants – are put on hold in order to improve the feasibility and quality of the proposal. The interviewed PhD candidates reported this process as very useful, as it helped them to improve their plans by allowing them (and their supervisors) to further detail all aspects of the proposal with an eye on the feasibility of their project.

Overall, the Committee finds that ICO's evaluation of PhD proposals and its focus on detailed training and supervision plans provide valuable external support to complement the support offered by the universities. This plan promotes transparency and accountability in the quality of supervision.

In 2023, ICO revised its membership classifications to align with the Recognition and Rewards programme at its universities, expanding eligibility beyond research-focused academics to include early career researchers and teaching-focused scholars. The new structure also encourages members to take on senior roles and actively participate in organising ICO courses and events, with post-PhD classifications now including Associate Fellow, Fellow, Senior Fellow, Emeritus Fellow, and ICO Alumnus.

ICO has a large PhD membership, with 183 PhD candidates in 2023 (both full-time and part-time). PhD candidates who are members of ICO have a relatively high success rate, as indicated both by high number of timely PhD completions and very low discontinuation rates. The Committee sees this as a testament to the quality of the educational programme at ICO.

Although the diversity of members (both PhD candidates and fellows) is not directly under ICO's control, there is still a substantial degree of diversity among ICO members in terms of gender, age, and cultural, disciplinary, or professional background. The gender distribution for PhD candidates and early career fellows appears to be more balanced than at other institutions. Diversity in educational and/or methodological backgrounds and professional experience among PhD candidates is increasing, since PhD members increasingly have a background in teaching.

The yearly ICO Monitor tracks the progress of PhD projects and the well-being of PhD candidates. The monitor includes questions about expected delays, the experienced quality of supervision, and any other issues that PhD candidates might face. The results of the monitor are discussed within the governing board, which includes representatives from each participating university. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, data from the ICO Monitor were used to evaluate the potential needs of PhD candidates during this period, such as changes in the educational programme.

The Committee recognises the importance of the ICO Monitor and sees its potential for evaluating and discussing the PhD candidates' needs in terms of academic progress and personal well-being. This is especially crucial at present, considering the current budget cuts and concerns regarding career prospects. Given ICO's strong presence across universities, it has the potential to highlight cross-institutional trends and inform collective decision making in support of PhD candidates in the educational sciences.

### 11.6 Future strategy and viability

Across recent years, ICO has demonstrated solid results in terms of the quality of their training programme, the success rates of their PhD projects, and the overall well-being of its PhD members. While many other interuniversity research schools (in related scientific fields) have disappeared in recent years, ICO is still surviving and even thriving.

In recent years, PhD membership trends have slightly shifted in a way that could strengthen ICO's long-term viability. Since the introduction of the 'part-time' membership category in 2012, the number of part-time PhD candidates has increased significantly, driven mostly by changes in national funding schemes. Many of these part-time members are educational practitioners, offering ICO valuable opportunities to integrate fundamental and applied research within its educational programme. Their practical insights can enrich the perspectives of PhD candidates with a fundamental background, while those with a more theoretical background can contribute to practice-focused discussions. In the long run, this exchange can help bridge the gap between research and practice in the educational sciences. The presence of both perspectives is highly valuable and deserves to be monitored.

When it comes to financial matters, the participating universities fully cover ICO's budget. The costs for ICO's training programme are shared between the participating universities based on the number of participating PhD candidates. In 2023, the annual fee was €759.43 for full-time PhD candidates and €455.66 for part-time PhD candidates. This fee grants free access to all ICO educational activities. External participants in an ICO course pay a fee of €1,000 per course.

Lecturers at ICO do not receive a fee (or teaching time) for teaching, only reimbursement for travel expenses. This currently limits ICO's ability to recruit teachers for their courses (although, according to the senior staff, teaching in ICO is seen as attractive) and to invite (international) guest speakers. These financial limitations might become more pressing in the upcoming years, as the budget cuts from the Dutch government might limit the funding possibilities for ICO membership. In order to alleviate these potential financial risks, the self-assessment report from ICO already listed some potential approaches, such as: (1) expanding the network to include non-affiliated universities, to generate additional financing from new PhD members; (2) pursuing more permanent funding from the government or institutions like the Netherlands Initiative for Education Research (NRO); and (3) collaborating with other institutions, to combine training programmes.

Additionally, the Committee would recommend that ICO consider whether it would be beneficial to increase their 'formal presence' at international conferences (such as the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI), for instance by facilitating specific "ICO-focused

symposia". This would offer the PhD members of ICO a platform to present their work along with their ICO colleagues and increase the visibility of ICO within the international research community. Participation in such conferences could stimulate international scholars to provide commentary on the research output by ICO members.

ICO has a strong network with dedicated members, including senior members who have themselves been PhD members. Despite the financial constraints, this strong community allows ICO to continue offering courses, as lecturers volunteer to teach. While this volunteer-driven model supports ICO's sustainability, the quality of the programme still depends on securing lecturers. The committee finds it promising that some universities recognise teaching at ICO as part of faculty teaching hours and recommends that ICO management continue**s** discussions with participating universities to explore additional ways to reward and/or compensate teaching at ICO.

Overall, the Committee highly appreciates the significant value that ICO adds to the educational sciences community, particularly for its PhD candidate members but also for senior staff. Despite the financial concerns, the viability of ICO is promising as it has continued to thrive by having a cost-effective structure. It is commendable that ICO has been able to maintain such a strong role as a research school. To sustain this success, the continued investment by and collaboration between participating universities are essential.

## 11.7 Conclusion and recommendations

ICO plays a pivotal role in the training and development of PhD candidates in educational sciences by providing high-quality courses, facilitating networking opportunities, and offering guidance that complements the support available at local graduate schools. The organisation has demonstrated its capacity to adapt to evolving academic and professional landscapes, particularly in response to the increasing number of part-time PhD candidates and the growing emphasis on practice-oriented research.

To address financial challenges, ICO is exploring strategic measures, including expanding its network to non-affiliated universities, securing sustainable funding from governmental or research institutions, and fostering collaborations with other institutions to integrate training programmes. The Committee endorses this approach and further recommends the following actions:

- Continue discussions with participating universities to identify and implement additional mechanisms for recognising and compensating teaching contributions.
- Strengthen ICO's presence at international conferences to enhance its academic standing and broaden its institutional impact.

# Appendix A - Programme of the site visit

**Sunday February 2, 2025**

| Time | Part |
|---|---|
| 16:00 -19:00 | Preparatory meeting committee |
| 19:00 | Committee dinner |

**Monday February 3, 2025**

| Time | Part |
|---|---|
| **Freudenthal Institute (Utrecht University)** | |
| 08.30 - 09.00 | Preparation Freudenthal Institute |
| 09.00 - 09.35 | management |
| 09.35 -09.45 | evaluation |
| 09:45 -10:15 | PhD candidates |
| 10.15 -10.20 | short break |
| 10.20 -10.55 | senior staff |
| 10 .55 - 11.10 | evaluation |
| 11:10 - 11:45 | early career staff (for example postdoc, starting assistant prof) |
| 11.45 - 12.05 | preparing questions for 2nd meeting management |
| 12:05 -12:30 | 2nd meeting management (additional questions) |
| 12:30 -13:00 | reflection on Freudenthal Institute |
| 13:00 -13:30 | Lunch |
| **Nieuwenhuis Institute for Educational Research (University of Groningen)** | |
| 13:30 -14:00 | Preparation Nieuwenhuis Institute for Educational Research |
| 14:00 -14:35 | management |
| 14:35- 14:45 | evaluation |
| 14:45 -15:15 | PhD candidates |
| 15.15 -15.20 | short break |
| 15.20 -15.55 | senior staff |
| 15:55 - 16:10 | evaluation |
| 16:10 -16:45 | early career staff (for example postdoc, starting assistant prof) |
| 16.45 - 17.05 | preparing questions for 2nd meeting management |
| 17:05 -17:30 | 2nd meeting management (additional questions) |
| 17:30 -18:00 | Reflection on Nieuwenhuis Institute for Educational Research |

**Tuesday February 4, 2025**

| Time | Part |
|---|---|
| **Department of Education and Pedagogy (Utrecht University)** | |
| 08.30 - 09.00 | Preparation Department of Education and Pedagogy |
| 09.00 - 09.35 | management |
| 09.35 -09.45 | evaluation |

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| 09:45 -10:15 | PhD candidates |
| 10.15 -10.20 | short break |
| 10.20 -10.55 | senior staff |
| 10 .55 - 11.10 | evaluation |
| 11:10 - 11:45 | early career staff (for example postdoc, starting assistant prof) |
| 11.45 - 12.05 | preparing questions for 2nd meeting management |
| 12:05 -12:30 | 2nd meeting management (additional questions) |
| 12:30 -13:00 | reflection on Department of Education and Pedagogy |
| 13:00 -13:30 | Lunch |
| **Educational Sciences (Open Universiteit)** | |
| 13:30 -14:00 | Preparation Educational Sciences |
| 14:00 -14:35 | management |
| 14:35- 14:45 | evaluation |
| 14:45 -15:15 | PhD candidates |
| 15.15 -15.20 | short break |
| 15.20 -15.55 | senior staff |
| 15:55 - 16:10 | evaluation |
| 16:10 -16:45 | early career staff (for example postdoc, starting assistant prof) |
| 16.45 - 17.05 | preparing questions for 2nd meeting management |
| 17:05 -17:30 | 2nd meeting management (additional questions) |
| 17:30 -18:00 | Reflection on Educational Sciences |

**Wednesday February 5, 2025**

| Time | Part |
|---|---|
| **Institute of Education and Child Studies (Leiden University)** | |
| 08.30 - 09.00 | Preparation Education and Child Studies |
| 09.00 - 09.35 | management |
| 09.35 -09.45 | evaluation |
| 09:45 -10:15 | PhD candidates |
| 10.15 -10.20 | short break |
| 10.20 -10.55 | senior staff |
| 10 .55 - 11.10 | evaluation |
| 11:10 - 11:45 | early career staff (for example postdoc, starting assistant prof) |
| 11.45 - 12.05 | preparing questions for 2nd meeting management |
| 12:05 -12:30 | 2nd meeting management (additional questions) |
| 12:30 -13:00 | reflection on Education and Child Studies |
| 13:00 -13:30 | Lunch |
| **School of Health Professions Education (Maastricht University)** | |
| 13:30 -14:00 | Preparation School of Health Professions Education |
| 14:00 -14:35 | management |
| 14:35- 14:45 | evaluation |
| 14:45 -15:15 | PhD candidates |
| 15.15 -15.20 | short break |

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|---|---|
| 15.20 -15.55 | senior staff |
| 15:55 - 16:10 | evaluation |
| 16:10 -16:45 | early career staff (for example postdoc, starting assistant prof) |
| 16.45 - 17.05 | preparing questions for 2nd meeting management |
| 17:05 -17:30 | 2nd meeting management (additional questions) |
| 17:30 -18:00 | Reflection on School of Health Professions Education |

Thursday February 6, 2025

| Time | Part |
|---|---|
| **Research Institute of Child Development and Education (University of Amsterdam)** | |
| 08.30 - 09.00 | Preparation Research Institute of Child Development and Education |
| 09.00 - 09.35 | management |
| 09.35 -09.45 | evaluation |
| 09:45 -10:15 | PhD candidates |
| 10.15 -10.20 | short break |
| 10.20 -10.55 | senior staff |
| 10 .55 - 11.10 | evaluation |
| 11:10 - 11:45 | early career staff (for example postdoc, starting assistant prof) |
| 11.45 - 12.05 | preparing questions for 2nd meeting management |
| 12:05 -12:30 | 2nd meeting management (additional questions) |
| 12:30 -13:00 | reflection on Research Institute of Child Development and Education |
| 13:00 -13:30 | Lunch |
| **Pedagogical Sciences (Erasmus University Rotterdam)** | |
| 13:30 -14:00 | Preparation Pedagogical Sciences |
| 14:00 -14:35 | management |
| 14:35- 14:45 | evaluation |
| 14:45 -15:15 | PhD candidates |
| 15.15 -15.20 | short break |
| 15.20 -15.55 | senior staff |
| 15:55 - 16:10 | evaluation |
| 16:10 -16:45 | early career staff (for example postdoc, starting assistant prof) |
| 16.45 - 17.05 | preparing questions for 2nd meeting management |
| 17:05 -17:30 | 2nd meeting management (additional questions) |
| 17:30 -18:00 | Reflection on Pedagogical Sciences |

Friday February 7, 2025

| Time | Part |
|---|---|
| **ICO (national research school)** | |
| 08.30 - 09.00 | preparation ICO (national research school) |
| 09:00 -09:45 | ICO management |
| 09.45 - 10.00 | evaluation |

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| 10.00 - 10.45 | PhD candidates |
| 10:30 - 10:45 | reflecting ICO |
| 10.45 - 11.00 | break |
| 10 .55 - 11.10 | evaluation |
| **Joint meeting directors of all participating institutes** | |
| 11.00 - 11.15 | preparation of the joint meeting |
| 11:15 -12:30 | joint meeting (all institutes) |
| 12.30 - 13.00 | Lunch (committee) |
| 13:00 - 15:00 | final committee meeting (discussion /preparation report) |