

# The New Strategy Evaluation Protocol of the Netherlands

November 2021

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Funded by:

STIFTUNG  
MERCATOR

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If you want to reference this small case study, please cite as:

Flink, Tim. 2021. *The New Strategy Evaluation Protocol of the Netherlands. Berlin.*

# 1 Introduction

The Netherlands are well known for a strong and diversified innovation system. It draws its strengths from an inclusive two-tier education system (for vocational training or higher education), from proportionally large direct funds for universities and non-university research institutes, and from the cultivation of an internationally open and agile work culture. While spending on research and development only amounts to 2,2 % of its GDP<sup>1</sup>, Dutch universities and institutes continue to score comparably well in research. Moreover, knowledge transfer activities are placed high on the pedestal, not least because universities and research institutes are regarded key responsive actors for national but ever more so for regional innovations.

As early as of the 1980s, the academic performance in research, teaching and knowledge transfer gets systematically assessed and improved. Thereby, the Dutch institutions and academic staff have not only continued to develop an intelligent evaluation system but also an attitude that can, at best, be described as realistic and care-taking. The responsible institutions are the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) and the Dutch Research Council (NWO) that can be called the owners of academic practice.

In international comparison, the Netherlands can be described as a forerunner of systematic academic evaluations. Among other factors, this is also due to the fact that the social studies of science, science policy and innovation studies are acknowledged by academia and research policymaking as integral to the innovation system's development, while the respective scholarly community is well-known internationally for

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<sup>1</sup> The Netherlands rank on place eight of all EU countries (in the year 2019) and still below the OECD average of 2.5%. The spending rate has only slightly grown over the last ten years.

both its theoretical, conceptual and empirical contributions, as well as for training generations of scholars and practitioners of STI policy.<sup>2</sup>

In this regard, the current discourse about the societal impact of academic research is nothing new to the Dutch academic system but has in fact accompanied strategic questions of the Dutch academic landscape for many years, whilst being undergirded by concepts that have different names. In its recent forming, societal impact has been taken up as an integral part of the New Strategy Evaluation Protocol.

## 2 Societal impact and the Dutch Evaluation Protocols

The organisation and performance of academic institutions in the Netherlands get evaluated all six years. The goals and principles for these evaluations are laid out in the so called 'evaluation protocols', with the first being implemented in 1994. The protocols, now implemented for the sixth time, are continuously developed by KNAW, VSNU, NWO in cooperation with those that are being evaluated. While the first evaluation protocols mainly focused on research performance, their institutional contexts and, most importantly, further prospects, the Standard Evaluation Protocol (2009–2015) explicitly integrated demands on how to better take care of societal concerns, following its extensive evaluation and reconfiguration in 2013.<sup>3</sup> This requirement was implemented in the New

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<sup>2</sup> Institutions, such as the Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS) in Leiden, the Rathenau Instituut, the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, the Section of Science, Technology, and Policy Studies (STePS) or the Center for Higher Education Studies (CHEPS) at the University of Twente have veritably shaped studies and policies of science, technology, innovation and evaluation over the past decades.

<sup>3</sup> One should note that societal relevance had already been a criterion in the evaluation protocol from 2003–2009, next to the quality, productivity, vitality and feasibility of research units; see <https://www.knaw.nl/nl/actueel/publicaties/standard-evaluation-protocol-2015-2021> (last accessed 01.02.2022).

Strategy Evaluation Protocol, which was announced by the three institutions in March 2020 to being launched for the period of 2021–2027.

The concepts laid out in the evaluation protocols have important consequences for the interactive evaluation process. For example, the Standard Evaluation Protocol placed emphasis on research integrity and diversity, while the new Strategy Evaluation Protocol requires research groups to position themselves to the topics of openness of the science system (in terms of its responsiveness to societal concerns, and engagement with all members of society). In addition, the new SEP requires research groups to show how they foster an inclusive academic culture that offers sufficient social safety and that fosters the career development of its members, in particular young researchers.<sup>4</sup> These topical additions or changes have seized greater importance for both evaluators and those being evaluated, not least because the evaluations of Dutch academic institutions follow a *formative* evaluative approach that set evaluators and evaluatees into direct<sup>5</sup> interaction and emphasises joint learning. Thus, all involved parties have to be concrete in answering or evaluating these requirements.

## 2.1 How evaluations should work under the protocols

An SEP-based evaluation in its most recent forms follows a sequence of 27 steps, laid out by the protocol.<sup>6</sup> Here is the most simplified summary of the protocol's outline of evaluation steps: after having defined the terms of

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<sup>4</sup> That these and no other issues have made inroads into the SEP, is due to a policy discussion process that is organised in a working group between experts and organisation owners (i.e. their policy officers) who are responsive to the current science, technology and innovation policy discourses. In international comparison, the Netherlands do not deviate from what is discussed in current science, technology and innovation policy discourses of other countries and the European Union.

<sup>5</sup> See Gülker, S.; Simon, D.; Torcka, M. (2012): Evaluation as Science Consultancy? In *Quaderni: L'evaluation de recherche* 77, pp. 41–54.

<sup>6</sup> The procedure in detail can be found in the New Strategy Evaluation Protocol on p.12–14;

[https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/files/documenten/Domeinen/Onderzoek/SEP\\_2021-2027.pdf](https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/files/documenten/Domeinen/Onderzoek/SEP_2021-2027.pdf)

reference<sup>7</sup>, research groups (the so called research units) in their respective research institutions are invited to prepare for being evaluated according to their own research strategy. The research units should position themselves in their strategy along the following three categories: a) their research quality, b) their societal relevance and c) their research environment. According to interviewed experts, one cannot emphasize enough that the idea of the SEP, especially the new one, is to engage with research units in a joint learning exercise. In preparation for an evaluation, a research unit drafts a self-assessment report (roughly 20 pages) in which it positions itself to the aforementioned criteria. With regard to the specificities of disciplines and local environments, it is the research units themselves who determine what they hold relevant. In the Standard Evaluation Protocol, these reports already consisted of a narrative description of what a research unit had been and will be working on. Further to the three criteria, research units could position themselves to e.g. disciplinary specificities or add further criteria they could not find in an ever-growing addendum.

The New Strategy Evaluation Protocol differs from the former Standard Evaluation Protocol in that quantitative assessment criteria should not play a role anymore. Most notably, the *evaluation committee*<sup>8</sup> that is assessing the research group is supposed not to resort to these criteria when forming their judgement.<sup>9</sup>

After having assessed the evaluation report, the evaluation committee and the research unit prepare for what is called a *site visit*. Committee members visit the groups, listen to the presentation of their research and impact strategy and engage in discussions about the group's merits and plans. On the basis of both the evaluation report and the site visit that is

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<sup>7</sup> This includes defining research units (e.g. consisting of a minimum of ten tenured academics with 100% FTE, working consistently together for a minimum of three years etc.), impartial and diverse assessment committees, the time frame and cut-off dates for the formative evaluation etc.

<sup>8</sup> Assessment committees are appointed by the SEP board and comprise of independent academic peers (and sometimes non-academic experts).

<sup>9</sup> VSNU, KNAW and NWO have subscribed to the San Francisco declaration Of Research Assessment (DORA) guidelines that rejects the use of journal-based measures, such as journal impact factors, the h-index and i-10-index; see <https://sfdora.org>.

protocolled, the committee judges the research group's standing and strategic planning. This judgement takes the form of an assessment report which is sent to SEP board. Finally, the board publishes a summarized report including its case studies and further documents that are made publically available to show societal accountability.

## 2.2 Societal impact and the SEP

Societal impact has been integrated into the SEP for many years. But there is a qualitative shift in how societal impact gets accredited and honed as part of a continuing process of reflection. There is much less of an emphasis on research excellence which was still central in the Standard Evaluation Protocol. Rather, the new SEP places more weight to the question how research units can develop a strategy that positions the group in its research and social environment. As interviewed experts emphasised numerous times, the central question is not anymore whether a research unit is performing comparably well or not. The question is what strategic goals it defines for itself, whether these goals make sense, and if they are feasible for a group.

The question of what strategic goals make sense, again, was discussed over a series of meetings among the committee and board members as well as the so called *users* of the protocol, i.e. university management staff from the central level and the departments, evaluation experts, the program owner's chairs and policy officers as well as selected research group members. While societal relevance is placed high on the pedestal of the new SEP, interestingly enough only very few societal actors and no ministerial staff took part in this strategic reconfiguration toward the new SEP. Thereby, societal relevance of academic activities has always played an integral part in strategic thinking, and Dutch universities are acknowledged for playing a strong role in their local environments.

The slightly stronger emphasis on societal relevance in the new SEP, as interviewees have reported, has to be taken seriously, but it would also have to be seen as one side of a coin, while the other shows the “usual”

performative front-stage talk and measures of public justification.<sup>10</sup> In any case, the way of arguing in self-assessment reports of former SEP evaluations does not show a standardized approach – and neither is there a fixation to specific let alone quantifiable criteria. In some cases, research units argued that societal relevance is already achieved whenever research was done on societally relevant topics, in others cases exchange with actors outside the hallways of academia was deemed sufficient to showcase societal relevance. And in yet other cases, non-scientific outlet of research (e.g. public media appearance) was highlighted as a way of showing societal relevance.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.3 Conclusion

Despite their continuous mending, the SEP-based evaluations are widely accepted in the Netherlands and highly valued internationally. As an interviewed expert made it very clear, if some might see these formative evaluations as a nuisance, this would rather count as big-time whinging than complaints for serious reason. After all SEP-based evaluations represent a rather soft governance tool, whose aim is to help research groups develop a strategy and to get its members reflect about their role in their academic and societal environments. In this regard, the SEP-based evaluations greatly differ from e.g. strong evaluation regimes, such as in the UK, where evaluations assess performance and distribute money based on these results thereafter. Secondly, the evaluations – and especially the new one – are forward-looking tools, despite elements of ex post assessment. Secondly, they are bottom-up oriented, i.e. they are fully oriented toward how research unit draft their strategy in a narrative form. After the last SEP was ameliorated as regards a consolidation of hitherto

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<sup>10</sup> See for example the website <https://recognitionrewards.nl/> that has been set up by NWO, the Dutch Federation of University Medical Centres (NFU) and VSNU to show societal impact, inter alia via catchy stories, competitions and festivals.

<sup>11</sup> For example, see de Jong, S.; Smits, J. and van Drooge, L. (2016) ‘Scientists’ response to societal impact policies: A policy paradox’, in *Science and Public Policy* 43(1), 102-114. <https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scv023>



too many criteria, the new SEP categorically crosses out quantitative performance indicators.

With respect to societal impact, there is yet even more freedom to self-define its meaning. Whereas not much can be written about the currently started SEP-based evaluation, interviewed evaluation experts worry whether evaluated research units and the evaluators can actually handle their great degrees of freedom. Clearly, the burden is on the research units to draft a convincing narrative about their work and its academic and societal relevance. But experts are also optimistic about the capabilities of research units to draft convincing narratives, not least because societal relevance was not thrust upon them, such as in the first round of the British REF. Rather, Dutch academic institutions and academic staff would find themselves in a continuous process of engaging with civil society. The Dutch universities and research institutes act on the basis of strategic framework plans in which criteria of societal impact play a major role, in many of the NWO funding schemes, research applicants have to position themselves to societal relevance, while the funding organisation has organised the Impact Outlook Approach, to name one among numerous strategies, and the Netherlands are a key beneficiary in the EU Framework Programmes, which since 1987 has followed a research policy approach of industrial competitiveness and societal relevance.

In this regard, the SEP-based evaluations are one piece of the puzzle, while their drive away from quantitative indicators to prove competitiveness toward a socially secure academic environment, open science are also good signs for how societal relevance is valued.