

Response to FASoS Accreditation Recommendations

Approved by the FASoS Faculty Board on 3 July 2024.

Prepared by Sally Wyatt, Associate Dean for Research, with input from Research Programme Directors, Heads of Department, Faculty Board members, Research Support Staff, Marketing & Communication Staff, Graduate School Director and Advisory Board, FASoS Representatives on Inner City Ethics Committee and Research Integrity Platform.

The committee arrived at the following conclusions and recommendations. FASoS responses are in *italics*.

1. FASoS research programmes **exhibit variation in size**. They collectively contribute to high-quality academic work, thereby facilitating the achievement of research excellence. The committee reaffirmed its very positive impression of **FASoS research during the site visit**.

We are grateful to the committee for their positive feedback, and their careful and constructive approach to the accreditation process.

2. The committee has concluded that FASoS has a promising future with respect to its **funding position, personnel outlook, and mission and strategic positioning**. The committee suggests that the faculty might consider developing **contingency plans to address less successful periods in external funding**.

We are aware that external funding for research fluctuates from year to year. We have built up reserves both from educational funding and from research overheads in order not to be dependent on external funding. To support external funding acquisition, we have expanded our funding support and project administration capacity.

3. The committee recommends extending the lessons learned from the challenging **Covid-19 period and applying them during the onboarding of new colleagues and PhD candidates**.

The pandemic period reinforced our appreciation of FASoS as a close-knit community that needs to be cherished. We have increased our efforts in welcoming new colleagues and PhD candidates as follows:

- *In the past, we had just one key introduction session for new staff in late August. We now have two, to accommodate staff who join at other points in the year. Both include academic and administrative staff. These include a tour of the facilities, presentations about different services, and a social lunch.*
- *Heads of Department and Research Programme Directors also pay attention to onboarding as does the Graduate School Advisory Board (for PhD candidates), including a buddy system for new staff.*
- *We have organised more 'fun' events during the year, such as the Summer Festival and the 30th anniversary celebrations. The latter run throughout 2024.*

- *At central UM-level, a working group has been established to professionalise onboarding, including PhD candidates. This will be rolled out in April-June 2024, and will be brought to the attention of all colleagues with staff supervision responsibilities as soon as possible.*
4. FASoS has started exploring ways to **reward achievements and career prospects** of its diverse staff and it seems to be on the right track to keep researchers motivated. Replacing retiring staff members will provide opportunities to maintain the well-balanced composition of the faculty's workforce. FASoS would be well-advised to continue reviewing its **career principle policy**, to ensure that its diverse faculty are rewarded based on their achievements and that the policy works to achieve its goals.

UM generally, and FASoS in particular, have been pioneering in the implementation of the national initiative known as 'Recognition and Rewards' (R&R). R&R was introduced in FASoS during 2021, and is constantly being evaluated and refined.

- *In the autumn of 2024, HR will start strategic personnel planning (SPP) in all departments. With SPP, we want to ensure optimal deployment of our employees, not only now but also in the future, and to ensure a balance in seniority of academic staff.*
 - *Both UM centrally and the Maastricht Young Academy are holding focus groups and conducting surveys to evaluate experiences with R&R.*
 - *The Faculty Board will consider establishing a 'professorial plan', in line with central policies (being revised in 2024).*
 - *There is ongoing discussion at both central and faculty levels about horizontal and vertical rewarding of staff. In other words, apart from promotion, what other ways are there to reward staff for their achievements?*
5. The committee has determined that FASoS consistently **applies human resources principles** and **actively fosters an academic culture** that benefits both its members and the institute's overall academic performance. The committee recommends ongoing efforts to strengthen the faculty's academic culture and internal communication.

We are indeed trying to foster such an academic culture, not least by organising meetings around content. These already happen at faculty, research programme, research centre levels. Plus there are additional ad hoc meetings arranged by some departments and informal groups with shared interests. In addition, every two months, a member of academic staff shares their research with administrative staff during an informal lunch meeting.

- *Internal communication and increasing transparency of decisions taken within FASoS are high on the agenda of the Faculty Board. The Board is working on this together with the Faculty Council.*
- *In late 2022, UM introduced Umployee, an intranet. While FASoS is one of the leading users of this system, our MarComm department is continuously looking for ways to improve it. For example, we noticed that people were reluctant to share details of new publications when it involved posting a self-congratulatory message. We changed that, to produce a weekly list and that is working well. MarComm is also*

exploring how departments can make effective use of their departmental groups so as to decrease email traffic.

6. The committee commends FASoS for its ability to encourage and facilitate a wide range of outreach activities while maintaining high academic standards and an academic profile for its researchers. But the faculty could do more to offer **structural support** and employ an **explicit outreach strategy** in order to succeed more and establish more **non-academic networks**.

FASoS is committed to reaching out to non-academic networks, in a variety of languages, where relevant. This can be challenging given the international nature of staff, and the diversity of research topics, both of which are cherished. We have a number of good examples, especially with cultural organisations in the region. There are also strong contacts with national and EU policy makers of different sorts.

In 2024, staffing in MarComm will be increased. A new person will be hired to produce more content, and the existing research communication officer will devote more time to developing a professional outreach strategy for FASoS.

7. FASoS is advised to engage proactively with local communities, including considering the implementation of a language policy. Facilitating outreach in the Dutch language would further enhance awareness of and support for the university in Maastricht and the Limburg region.

This point is well taken, and we will explore ways of extending our outreach activities in the region. We can build on a number of already existing relationships with Brightlands and the Venlo Campus. With other faculties, we are exploring the possibilities for establishing a Sustainable Campus in Heerlen that would feed into these endeavours.

In addition, some of our research centres already have strong regional connections, especially around cultural heritage and local history. The SHCL initiative ([Academisch Cultuur/historisch Overlegplatform Limburg, ACOL](#)), started in early 2024, actively works with local communities to develop and make sustainable documents and artefacts relating to the Limburg region.

We will explore how best to strengthen contacts with local and regional stakeholders (including the public) to showcase our research and develop new research projects. To do this effectively, staff will need training about how best to engage with broader publics.

8. The committee supports the idea of bringing together PhD candidates from both Brussels and Maastricht to foster stronger collaboration and cohesion. More generally, **there appears room for further integration of internal and external PhDs**.

The Graduate School (GS) shares this ambition. Currently all GS meetings (regular curriculum, biannual conference, social events) are open to Brussels candidates and registered external candidates. Turnout is however low. Reasons are presumed to be the incompatible schedules of Brussels and external candidates (usually employed), and the

physical distance between Maastricht and Brussels or other places where external / Brussels candidates are based.

We propose the following additional initiatives:

- *Explicitly invite Brussels and external PhD candidates to academic events at FASoS aimed at employed staff and PhD candidates, such as the biennial PhD conference in Maastricht, research programme colloquia and academic conferences. The same applies to social events and outings, organised by research programmes, departments and the faculty.*
 - *Invite PhD candidates from Maastricht to the annual June conference of the Brussels PhD candidates.*
 - *Return to hybrid meetings, to facilitate participation from external and Brussels candidates.*
 - *To address the scheduling problems of external and Brussels candidates in GS events, we have discussed offering events in the evening. There is currently an evening session on ‘the final year of the PhD’ open to the Brussels-based candidates each year. A few more of such sessions (either in the Brussels programme or the GS) could be targeted specifically at external candidates. It is unclear whether internal candidates will attend evening events, as this may not fit their daily rhythm. In that sense, evening events may facilitate participation by Brussels and external candidates, but may not necessarily create better integration with internal and scholarship candidates.*
 - *Explore the possibilities of introducing a system of coaching for external PhD candidates by internal, senior PhD candidates.*
 - *Invite external PhD candidates to give lectures in MA/BA courses in the area of their professional expertise/PhD thesis.*
9. Observing a positive downward trend in average PhD completion times in recent years, the committee advises FASoS to continue providing **assistance to internal and external PhDs and supervisors in achieving timely completion.**

We are glad to read this acknowledgement for the success of existing GS policies. The GS has started a discussion on how best to restructure the monitoring procedures for PhD candidates. This includes a more structured and uniform approach to annual assessment talks, for both internal and scholarship candidates. The ‘signature publication’ suggested by the committee (see point 11 below) could become a regular point of attention in this context.

10. The committee found the PhD training and programme to be well- structured and well-developed and was overall impressed with the efforts in this area. In the future attention could be paid on developing a structured onboarding programme to ensure integration of all new PhDs (and possibly other staff). A clearer workflow for crisis and conflict situations could also be considered to ensure PhDs are effectively supported when a problem arises.

We welcome these positive remarks, and note that welcoming new staff is an issue for all new employees, not only PhD candidates. See point 3 above.

We have recently undertaken the following, or plan to do so in the near future:

- *The GS has long provided ‘welcome packages’ to new PhD candidates. These are regularly reviewed and updated. Recently, this information has been shifted to Umployee (see point 5). The PhD candidates are invited to contact the GS office or the Academic Coordinator if specific information is missing.*
- *The GS is currently developing a guidance document for scholarship PhD candidates, to help them understand their particular position in the Dutch system before arriving in Maastricht. An accompanying document is being written for supervisors.*
- *The GS Advisory Board will rethink the regular event welcoming new PhD candidates and marking the opening of the academic year. Possible ideas are to combine it with another event in the regular GS curriculum, or to make it less formal with drinks, etc., while sharing some important information on posters displayed around the faculty.*
- *The Research Support Office is working with the UM Concerns and Complaints Point to develop ‘crisis flowcharts’ for colleagues encountering difficult situations, regarding research integrity, harassment and social safety. There is a specific flowchart for PhD candidates.*

11. The committee advises supervisors to ensure that, where possible, a PhD candidate has at least one signature publication by the time they complete their PhD or to encourage PhD candidates who do not aim at landing an academic position, to make a PhD that has a direct importance for (local) outreach.

Currently, the GS addresses this issue during the CAFE meetings, held about one year prior to expected completion. Publication strategies and career plans are a regular point of attention. Supervisors are part of these meetings.

We have some hesitations about the idea of ‘signature publication’. If it is meant to enhance the visibility of a PhD candidate’s research in a scholarly community, we obviously endorse this goal. However, we should be mindful of the diversity in the types of publications most valued in different disciplines. There are diverging views in FASoS on what may constitute a ‘signature publication’ – single-authored vs. co-authored, journal articles and book chapters vs. monographs, non-traditional (3D scholarship, PhDs in the arts, etc.) vs. more traditional academic output, and so on.’ We wish to encourage PhD candidates to publish, when they are ready, but not to do so at any cost as this can lead to lower quality output.

The GS Advisory Board suggests making this issue a point of attention in the PhD candidate’s annual talks, while continuing to discuss this issue during the CAFE meetings. PhD supervisors and PhD candidate should be encouraged to find common ground on what constitutes a ‘signature publication’ in the context of the particular PhD project.

12. The committee noted that not all research plans are discussed by UM Ethics Review Committee for Inner City (ERCIC) faculties. The committee suggests it may be advisable to review the FASoS Human Ethics policy with a view to ensuring that there is systematic consideration of whether ethical standards have been adhered to.

Note that FASoS does not have its own Human Ethics policy. However we do offer a number of internal activities to encourage ethical reflection. These include research ethics and integrity training offered by the University Library and our own Graduate School. In addition, all PhD candidates are required to address the ethical and data management issues in their research plans, submitted six months after they start their PhD. On a less intensive level, this also applies to research master students. We regularly offer workshops for PhD supervisors to discuss related issues such as co-authoring, and open access publishing. We will consider expanding this offer to address ethical issues arising from working with vulnerable communities (see [Cape Town Statement on Research Integrity, 2022](#)).

There are a number of additional steps we can take:

- *Work with ERCIC towards informing and encouraging staff to take advantage of ethical review as support for sustainable research practices. The previous ERCIC chair prepared some presentations that could be repurposed for FASoS.*
- *In addition, we have in-house expertise, such as past and present ERCIC members and colleagues who study research integrity.*

13. The committee acknowledges the faculty's consistent efforts to ultimately make all publications openly accessible. Practical and financial constraints have somewhat limited the faculty's pace, but the committee appreciates the pragmatic approach being taken and the efforts by the faculty management to voice concerns about the constraints given the specificity of publication and research outputs in the humanities and social sciences. The committee is convinced that openness is one of FASoS' core values.

We are grateful that the committee recognises our efforts, despite the well-known constraints regarding making data and publications open. We will continue to work with the University Library to improve awareness of the possibilities for open access publishing and data management. We have prepared a FASoS open science strategy, which addresses issues around pre-registration, data management, co-creation of research, and OA publishing.

FASoS has a small, temporary fund to support the payment of article processing charges for journals not covered by the national deals with commercial publishers. We will continue to monitor the take-up of this fund, both to secure additional financial resources and to consider extending it to contributions towards the open access costs for research monographs published with selected university presses.

Openness is one of the core values of FASoS, and of academic research more generally. In light of that, we will continue to look for ways to reduce the practical and financial bottlenecks. This is not just a faculty responsibility, but is also a matter of concern for other faculties, the University Library, and the CvB.