

## **Addendum to the Mid-Term Research Review of the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR)**

### **Evaluated by:**

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### **Introduction**

This document serves as an extension of the ISS Mid-Term Research Review 2023, with the inclusion of a PhD committee member and a goal to evaluate the institute on its main assessment criteria, reflecting on PhD research and training at the institute. The evaluation is primarily based on interviews with 6 self-funded or fellowship PhD students at ISS, The Self-Assessment Report for 2017-2022, and the 2023 Mid-Term Research Review. The addition of a fourth member supports the review committee in concluding its findings for the ISS Strategic Plan for 2018-2022. A PhD perspective is introduced to understand how the units' activities and initiatives have supported its research aims and mission for its growing PhD community.

The review features an analysis of the three main assessment criteria with commentary on open science, PhD policy and training, academic culture, and human resources in relation to PhD research at ISS. The documents were reviewed against the aims of the institute as they concern the PhD programme and in accordance with the institute's research vision: "To produce internationally competitive, critical development-oriented research with substantial relevance to society and high-quality education in development studies, in order to contribute to the enhancement of well-being and social justice and a more equitable world". A short summary of recommendations is presented at the end of this review.

Since most of the interviews were held with self-funded fellows who cover the majority PhD community, the analysis produces a limitation as it does not necessarily represent the voice of those who are employed as PhDs (AIO), working in partnership with other universities, or in diverse fellowship arrangements. The identity of the reviewer, as a woman from the global south conducting PhD research in Development Economics at a university in The Netherlands, informs their approach to evaluation, particularly in terms of assessing internationalisation, inclusion, and diversity.

## Research Quality

From 2018 through 2022, ISS has made substantial contributions relating to societally relevant and high-quality PhD research and training. This assessment determines that PhD research at the institute has made meaningful contributions towards its mission. Particularly of note is the commitment of ISS and its PhD researchers towards engagement in critical development, including non-conventional research agendas, in Global Development and Social Justice. The reviewer acknowledges that the institute offers PhD researchers room to flourish and collaborate, the current model encourages academic freedom and provides a space for its candidates to innovate in the social sciences. ISS has established itself as a leading institute in PhD research and training in development studies and as a critical institute, based on tangible markers and a clear vision. The success of its growing PhD programme which attracts high-quality PhD talent is evidenced by diverse alumni profiles, publications by PhDs, and a strong outflow of PhD graduates.

In relation to aim 1.6: *'To make the PhD programme effective and supportive, including supervision and care'*, the Self-Assessment report acknowledges several challenges pertaining to supervision and care for which various steps have been undertaken, including assignment of a welfare advisor and the development of a formalised Training and Supervision Plan (TSP). In addition to updated PhD rules and regulations and a formalised TSP, care and supervision have the potential to be more equitable where every student is effectively supported, in terms of opportunities offered and the availability of the supervisory team. With this recommendation to close the gap in supervision delivery, it is important to take note that the norm is that PhD researchers are satisfied with supervision at the institute, several PhDs stated that their supervisors *'go the extra mile'* and invest substantial time and effort towards their students' research.

PhD training, as observed in the interviews, has been integral in building research skills and capacity. The review takes note of the TSP and the purpose it has served for tailored training, monitoring, and evaluation. Students have successfully participated in courses and opportunities that support their PhD research and skills. During conversations with candidates, it became evident that the student highly valued the new CERES courses, as well as classes in the MA Programme at ISS and training opportunities at other faculties. Yet, there is still a demand for courses which accord with a PhD level as well as increasing accessibility to skills and methods courses which are available at other faculties but do not necessarily have sufficient capacity. Additional opportunities for PhD training are largely at the discretion of the supervisor. Following the suggestion of the review committee to provide a flexible coursework set, dedicated codification and dissemination of learning opportunities can further support

access to and awareness of the current offering. The review acknowledges the availability of career workshops for students which are held at EUR. Job market trainings such as seasonal career workshops have been useful in supporting the capacity development of PhD researchers. Strengthening job market readiness to avenues specific to development studies can enhance sectoral alignment for candidates.

## **Societal Engagement**

A notably positive observation of the institute is the availability of opportunities for productive and effective public engagement emboldened by a dedicated framework for societal relevance. PhD researchers have utilised avenues for critical engagement, including brown-bag seminars, seminars with external speakers, BISS, Research InSightS, and conference funding, in addition to engagement with actors in the global south such as capacity building and research presentations. Additionally, candidates are generally of the view that the institute offers adequate publication support and appreciate the dedication to open science. The flexibility of the self-funded PhD programme has allowed students to focus on issues of vital importance to the global south, which encouraged both novelty and quality enabled by conference and research group funding. Students acknowledge that these opportunities are both aided by and lead to more collaboration within the units' research groups. However, collaboration between the research group rarely reaches PhDs, even if topics are thematically aligned. Collaborative research and engagement within groups generally have encouraged PhD research, supported their PhD trajectory, and have not been limited to faculty; PhDs appreciate opportunities to collaborate with master's students. The commitment of the unit towards societal relevance is well-established and should be sustained through continued support and funding of academic and public engagement.

## **Viability**

The Self-Assessment Report and PhD experiences acknowledge several challenges which come with the current structure and PhD recruitment diversity, in particular, the lack of opportunity towards university teaching and participating in grant acquisition which limits their integration within the broader academic community at the institute. PhD researchers have served various roles in the institute's governance, especially the IC, RDC, and IPSA. The reviewer was pleased to observe that the current structure enables institutional-level engagement and voice. However, one of the underlying issues, which may be influenced by the diversity in funding structures, relates to hierarchies in opportunities for negotiation with the research staff and supervisors which has influenced experiences in navigating

PhD policy, learning, fieldwork, and engagement. This was particularly noted during the COVID-19 Pandemic which created differences in policies related to contract extension.

The committee member acknowledges the focus on diversity and inclusion within the unit, as well as a commitment to integration and care, especially with the appointment of a welfare advisor to address PhD researchers' concerns and the introduction of a PhD Wiki. The efforts of the advisor were valued across the PhD research community. However, the long-term absence with no other personnel serving this role was noted to have influenced inclusion and integration. Since the PhD body largely consists of researchers from the global south, inclusion is certainly of central concern. The collegiality within the institute and cohesiveness among the PhDs have been prominent aspects of the academic culture at ISS in the current review period. PhD researchers have often relied on their colleagues for access to information and resolution of concerns related to integration into Dutch society and the unit. Since admissions are on a rolling basis, a dedicated onboarding programme for individuals/cohorts could support better assimilation, a suggestion which emerged from several discussions on PhD integration. Such processes may also be able to aid incoming PhD researchers set expectations and navigate norms related to PhD research and supervision at the unit.

There is no doubt that PhD research has been central to the activities of the institute, as three of eight key research aims for its strategy are related directly to the PhD programme, which is a vital part of the larger institutional structure. These structures reflect on the PhD experience as well. The unit houses a professionally run PhD programme with excellence in research and supervision at its core. Although a greater proportion of PhD researchers fall under the fellowship and AIO categories compared to the previous strategic period, funding has been acknowledged as a significant roadblock for an equitable PhD programme, because the heterogeneity in funding structures leads to apprehension and disparate experiences. Several dedicated institutional mechanisms are in place to drive an excellent PhD programme as acknowledged in interviews with PhD researchers and the Mid-Term Research Review. Future strategic impetus towards bringing experiences closer together could support a programme which has seen growth in both size and importance. The value addition of PhD research at ISS is integral to its success as an innovative, diverse, international, and inclusive institute. Despite clear challenges in funding heterogeneity, a proactive focus on bringing opportunities for teaching, MA supervision, and participation in grant acquisition and funding could support the growth of PhD researchers and their exposure to a broad array of academic skills.

### **Summary of Recommendations:**

1. Sustain and where possible expand science communication and public engagement opportunities and funding. PhD researchers at the institute are passionate about making an impact with research and this sense of engagement is a unique strength;
2. Funding is a well-acknowledged issue in the self-evaluation and among the academic community. Apprehensions related to funding are diverse and lead to hierarchies of opportunity, power and negotiation which need to be systemically observed and addressed;
3. Support the ambitions of PhD candidates and enhance opportunities for academic engagement, particularly with regard to teaching. There is room to innovate towards finding non-mainstream avenues for growth in academic instruction for PhD researchers;
4. To strengthen governance, future initiatives could focus on transparency, internal communications, and onboarding to improve the connection of PhD researchers with the institute and their integration into Dutch society;
5. The unit's commitment to research excellence is acknowledged based on reviewed documents and interviews, PhD researchers contribute towards a critically engaged, diverse, and vibrant institute. The initiation of a new strategy should continue to support their meaningful engagement with the activities of the institute.