

## Academics help rethink performance evaluation process

# Fewer scores and more discussion

Wageningen academics want a more varied evaluation policy, but what should that look like? A committee held in-depth interviews and studied five issues. Main conclusion: fewer scores and more discussion.



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All the Dutch universities are currently reassessing how they want to acknowledge and evaluate their academic staff.

This is in response to developments in the field of Open Science and criticism of Tenure Track (TT), the career trajectory at the universities that prioritizes research productivity. Critics argue for a broader approach to evaluation that also rewards things like teaching quality, academic services, articles in popular magazines and leadership. The WUR Executive Board appointed a committee in March this year, tasked with coming up with proposals. How is it going?

‘We want to hear from the academic staff, including postdocs, which points in the assessment policy they consider important,’ says Hannah van Zanten, a member of the advisory committee. ‘So we are creating a survey, but then what questions should we ask? That’s why we are starting with in-depth inter-

views focussing on five themes that are relevant nationwide. We are now using those interviews to formulate questions for the survey.’

## Did the coronavirus crisis obstruct the work of the committee?

‘The coronavirus outbreak made the work of the committee more difficult, because scientists suddenly had to work in entirely new ways. But it clarified and sharpened the questions already facing us – like work pressure, for instance. You could say: what we want is an HR policy that is Covid-proof.’

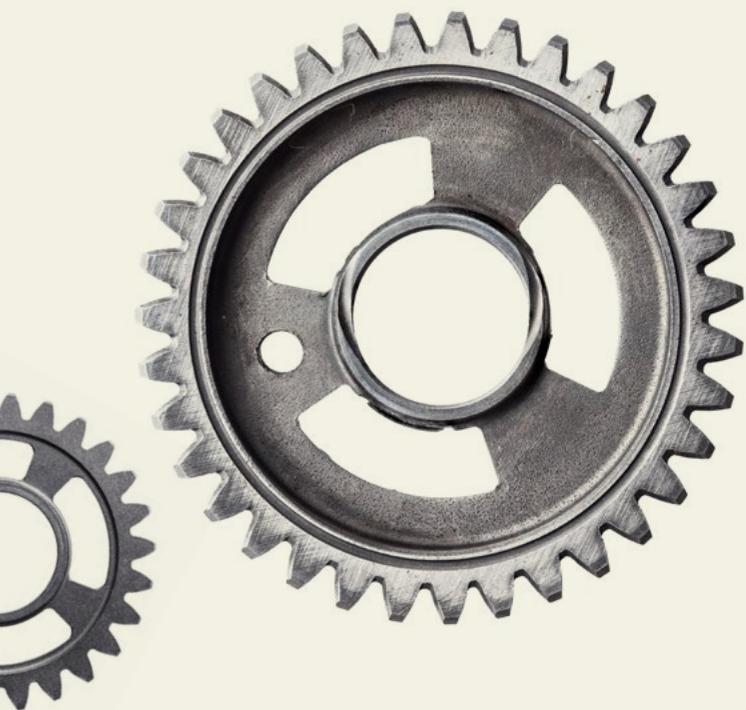
## What do you want to keep from the existing assessment system?

‘What has struck us so far is that our scientists are happy with the clear structure of Tenure Track. Some of them would like to make some changes

to the details, but not to the structure. They also want us to keep up the high research output and the good score for educational quality. And they are happy that interdisciplinary research is appreciated by WUR, and that education is included in Tenure Track. They are positive, too, about the short communication lines within WUR, and they applaud the independence of the Broad Assessment Committees (BACs).’

## When will the survey be published?

‘By the end of the year, I hope. We are going to ask an agency to formulate the questions, and we hope that everyone will fill in the survey.’



WUR is going to conduct a survey among the academic staff on five themes that are coming in for a lot of attention nationwide. A WUR committee started by holding in-depth interviews to find out how the five themes are relevant to Wageningen scientists. Committee member Hannah van Zanten explains.

## 1 Job descriptions and career paths

'Scientists have different kinds of jobs, and how do you deal with that? In Tenure Track, for example, you mainly get points for academic articles. Don't committees, presentations to farmers, or writing a column count as well? A Tenure Tracker might see that differently to the way a postdoc sees it, because not all the essential tasks of a chair group are done by a Tenure Tracker. The other question is: are we flexible about that in the evaluation policy? Are those other tasks valued by the chair-holding professor? We need an answer to that. The stricter the criteria are within TT, the less scope there is in a chair group for widening the career path.'

## 2 Individual-group balance

'Tenure Track assesses our scientists primarily on their qualities as individuals, but we want good research teams as well. How do you create such a team, how do you ensure that the tasks are fairly distributed, and how can you make the best use of your resources as a chair-holder? We are thinking about criteria for teams as well: what makes a team excellent? You need to have the tools to excel, and research groups should reserve time to talk about that. What comes out of the discussions is that the chair-holding professors put their stamp on the formation of the team. We need bottom-up processes here too: staff who can free up time and budget to support the team.'

## 3 More focus on quality and creativity

'In the assessment process we want to pay more attention to quality and creativity, but how do you do that? Now the focus lies on numbers and impact factors, and the BAC assesses whether you meet the criteria and should get the points: it's a one-way street. What we are hearing is: that should be a conversation, it has to come from both sides. A scientist has several different tasks. We weigh them up and in the assessment we emphasize one of the tasks, getting people from outside the BAC to evaluate whether the person has made a significant or unique contribution. This lends more substance to the discussion, which includes the question of how I can go on learning as a scientist.'

## 4 Open Science

'We have decided that we will share as much data and as many articles as possible with other people, but that costs time and money. On the other hand, we also want to respect privacy so we sometimes have to keep data and sources anonymous. We need to find the right balance in that. And how can we involve the general public more in our research? Citizen science should be given a place in our day-to-day work, and that is another task that deserves to be valued.'

## 5 Academic leadership

'Leadership doesn't only play a role at the full professor level. And yet it isn't always included in staff evaluations. The permanent staff usually supervise the PhD students, the PhD students often supervise Master's students, and we should actually evaluate that supervision properly, whereas it tends to be raised as a bit of an afterthought. This is partly about how much supervision, and what sort of supervision, does a PhD student want, and how can supervisors deliver it? Do they have too many PhD students, or are their PhD students so independent that you can supervise them all properly? We must get clarity on that in a conversation about academic leadership.' ■