



**Utrecht
University**

**Research Strategy
Utrecht University School of Governance
2021-2026**

Co-creating public value

Aim of this document and background

This research strategy outlines the collective ambition and goals for USG research for the years 2021–2026, both with regard to research policy and organisation, as well as to relevant themes and areas of research. This strategy document serves to explicate what binds USG research by defining our collective identity and distinctive approach. It aims to provide direction for researchers and research teams, while maintaining room for individual choices. The document also serves to inform new colleagues, external partners, international collaborators, the Utrecht University board and external reviewers of USG's mission and strategy. This strategy is a continuation of the research strategy 2016–2020 (Public Matters, Co-creating Value) and includes insights of the self-assessment report 2014–2019 and assessment report 2014–2019. The strategy also connects with Utrecht University's Strategic Plan 2025 'Open mind, Open Attitude, Open Science'.

Mission and profile

Utrecht University School of Governance was established in 2000 as academic work community with an integrated approach to education, research and societal impact. Our programme focuses on Public Administration and Organisation Science. We are currently one of the largest and strongest departments worldwide with an excellent reputation, as is recognised by peers. USG has two main sections (Afdelingen), subdivided in five chairs (leerstoelgroepen):

- Section Public Governance and Management – chairs Public Governance and Public Management
- Section Organisation & Management – chairs Strategic HRM; Sport & Society; and Organisation Science

USG is a department in the Faculty of Law, Economics and Governance of Utrecht University, and has strong connections with the Law and Economics departments in the Faculty, as well as with many other Utrecht University research groups through interdisciplinary strategic themes, research hubs and focus areas.

USG is a vibrant and entrepreneurial scientific hub for innovative national and international research on the **governance and organisation of public issues**. The goal of our research is to study how public values are realised in varieties of public, hybrid, and private settings and how they can be improved. Our mission is to share knowledge with societal partners to create societal change: *Impact through connection*. We see Public Administration and Organisation Science as inspired by multiple disciplines, and we innovate and enrich our disciplinary roots by connecting to other disciplines.

Our research is relevant and contributes to the most current and pressing public issues in society. Open science and an open attitude are core values. We realise these values by continuously seeking synergy between research, societal impact and education. Our research is collaborative and connected to other disciplines, to societal partners, and international research networks. We adopt a pluriform understanding of research quality where multiple approaches, methods and types of scholarship can flourish. USG embraces different philosophical perspectives; values and research traditions without one approach dominating to the other, ensuring pluralism in research. Fundamental and monodisciplinary scholarship can lay foundations of understanding of problems, while interdisciplinary and applied research may contribute to innovative solutions. Critical, interpretative, positivist, behavioural and action research co-exist and each offer relevant perspectives to research questions on societal issues. Our ideal is that different perspectives and methods combine to inform and execute research agendas. We therefore actively seek combinations, cross-fertilisation and dialogue between disciplines and methodologies in research projects.

Our ambition for the coming period is to further increase the synergy between research, education and societal impact to realise more and better impact for society. This does not necessarily mean to develop *more connections as such, but creating qualitatively better cross-fertilisation, more meaningful outcomes, and deeper and longer-term connections between USG research groups, between USG and other departments and between USG and societal partners.*

We aim to improve organisational conditions for such cross-fertilisation to create synergy. We strive to be a professional, international, and diverse organisation while maintaining our collegial, informal and open culture.

■ Research focus and themes: What we do

Our programme offers a unique combination of public administration and organisation science. This combination flourishes through strong disciplinary research in these areas and through cross-fertilisation between these areas. Within our research groups, we have developed expertise on a variety of specific themes, most notably accountability, EU governance, democratic innovation, public professionalism, public sector motivation, public HRM, sport and society, vitality, behavioural public administration, digitalisation and safety and security. Innovation of research themes develops out of interdisciplinary collaborations and collaborations with societal partners.

Our aim for the period 2021–2026 is to use this expertise to create more academic and societal impact in three specific and urgent societal issues:

First and foremost, we aim to strengthen USG-wide research and impact on the *governance and organisation of sustainability*, as it is a core responsibility of any research programme to contribute to the survival of the planets' resources (including humans and their institutions). Secondly, we want to strengthen research and impact on *inclusion*, as a response to growing inequality and polarization in society. Third, a better understanding of the fundamental transformation of the governance and organisation of society through *digitalisation and the use of algorithms* is a key prerequisite to the realization of any meaningful outcome.

These themes are connected: Sustainability and inclusion are two fundamental public values that are required to make societies thrive. Digitalisation is increasingly the context in which values are realized. Digitalisation unsettles traditional theoretical and empirical conceptualizations of the state, of organisations and of governance, and poses fundamental challenges and changes to governance and organisations that run through all of USG's research themes, including sustainability and inclusion.

We want to connect our existing research and expertise to new questions around sustainability, digitalisation and inclusion, to increase the relevance of our existing research and contribute to more meaningful societal impact on the most pressing topics of today. How can behavioural public administration inform sustainability policy? How does digitalisation affect HRM in organisations? How can sports activities contribute to a more inclusive society? These questions combine extant research lines with urgent societal questions. We will not form new research groups but stimulate researchers to take the three research priorities into account when further developing research agendas.

Each theme has a different history and position within USG and requires a distinct research strategy to recognize the specific opportunities and capitalize on networks and path dependencies. All three themes are also the central themes in the development agenda of the USG bachelor B&O and will be further developed in close connection with USG's education programmes; with Utrecht University's strategic themes and interdisciplinary research groups; and with societal partners. A specific strategy for each of the three themes is presented in the appendix.

Objective 1: Connect and innovate existing knowledge and research agendas to increase impact on the governance and organisation of sustainability; inclusion and digitalisation.

■ Academic Workplace for Synergy between research, education and impact: How we work

Connecting theory and practice, connecting science and society, and connecting 'B&O' (governance and organisation) are core aspects of our mission. We believe that exchange and cross-fertilisation make research better. Blue-sky research, research commissioned by or developed with societal partners, education and executive education can strengthen each other as they result in deeper understanding and more meaningful knowledge. Demarcation lines between 'fundamental' and 'applied' research are increasingly blurred: 'fundamental' research can result in societal applications while commissioned research can result in scientific innovation and generate new relevant questions, and new funding opportunities. Education and executive education offer opportunities for research by students or in organisations and gives access to new networks for creating impact. We want to take full advantage of the opportunities for societal impact by increasing the synergy between USG domains and further develop USG as an academic workplace for synergy.

Strengthening synergy between domains requires agenda-building in teams; the innovation of research practices to transdisciplinary practices where synergy can develop; and the creation of organisational conditions that foster synergy.

Agenda-building: We aim for long term relations with stakeholders providing us with 'deeper' knowledge on societal knowledge needs; to meaningfully contribute to social change; and to generate the various resources (including financial resources) necessary to conduct research. Importantly, these relations allow us to develop long term collaborative research agendas that generate various types of knowledge and cross-fertilisation between academic; public; critical and policy-oriented knowledge. By recognising that co-creation is a dynamic and continuous process, we avoid projectification of our research and overproduction of short-term instrumental knowledge. Development of collaborative relations with societal partners is not an individual affair but requires teams with multiple skills where team members can build on each other's expertise and divide tasks. We aim to strengthen teams by actively stimulating the development of team-level research agendas. Teams can be USG research groups, interdisciplinary hubs or transdisciplinary research consortia. Team roles can be further developed with accountholders, and granting junior researchers access to research networks. Teams, not individuals, are the main locus for synergy between education, research, and impact. While work pressure in academia remains excessive, team science lifts the burden on individuals somewhat and prevents unrealistic expectations of researchers as 'five-legged sheep'.

Develop practices for transdisciplinary team-research: this requires a transformation from linear processes (from research to academic output to societal impact afterwards), to develop productive interactions with joint demand articulation and a variation of outputs (publications, policy changes, education programmes).

We actively seek combinations, cross-fertilisation and dialogue between disciplines and methodologies in research projects. Our aim is to increase combinations of research perspectives in team-based agendas and to stimulate conversations between approaches as this will enhance quality. This requires a baseline common ground to be able to understand each other; a flourishing seminar culture within and between research groups and an annual research day.

Specific attention is needed for reconciliation of different values and preferences, and for the maintenance of academic independence in connected practices. Our governance lab and living labs, and research platforms and hubs are workplaces to further professionalize and innovate transdisciplinary research, to strengthen its methodological basis. We will also consider questions with regard to scalability that are raised in experimental and lab settings.

In line with Utrecht University's Open Science programme, we will (further) stimulate open science practices. This involves public engagement; fair data; open access and pre-registration of experiments. All our research is public. We pursue Green open access as the default for all our publications, and Gold open access where possible. Open science research requires sound models and agreements for data sharing and data management in collaborative research. Our Research Days and Meetings, research unit meetings and social events serve to maintain a spirit of collegiality, curiosity and open mindedness.

Organisational conditions: We also aim to improve organisational conditions for synergy in several ways. An organisational support structure as well as a business model with incentives for entrepreneurship, while maintaining a sound financial basis for team science. Staff members can develop transdisciplinary leadership skills by pursuing a Senior Qualification for Advice (SKA) trajectory. Our research unit USG consultancy as well as education for professionals most directly demonstrates our engagement with practice. We aim for an organisational structure that maximises cross-fertilisation between the three domains and consolidates our academic third-stream research.

Objective 2: strengthen cross-fertilisation between activities and groups by developing team-based research and impact agendas to increase the quality and impact of our work

■ Academic quality and impact measurement: how we assess the quality of our research

As academic practices evolve, so do practices of safeguarding, monitoring, and assessing quality. We want to make team science the core of our assessments. We will develop a learning evaluation practice that fits the open and dynamic character of our workplace and approaches quality as a process, rather than a fixed set of criteria. We will develop open practices for performance reviews for various research teams, involving partners, and involving the use of our research in education, to foster dialogue about the impact of our research.

We remain firmly committed to established quality criteria regarding the fundamentals of academic practices: independence of research; transparency; publicness, and academic integrity. Research is based on solid evidence, gathered with rigorous methods and in ethical and GDPR-compliant research practices. Research is verifiable, reliable and if appropriate, reproducible. Professional data management is a condition for this. We pursue academic and societal impact through a combination of rigorous and relevant research: rigor for relevance¹.

With regard to quality of output, we aim for innovative contributions to scholarship in public administration and organisation science in publication outlets with high academic reputation. We value 'slow science' and recognize that academic impact requires commitment to a research agenda and the building of expertise and reputation over longer periods. Quantitative productivity measures are weak quality indicators and risk to result in bulk production of new papers with limited impact; or 'quick and dirty' publication on latest trends in journals with less reputation. Taking stock, integrating and sense-making of existing scholarship are important as well as boundary-pushing with new approaches. Research handbooks, edited volumes; research syntheses; special issues or monographs – sometimes undervalued forms of stewardship that nevertheless may have high academic and societal impact. Where possible, FAIR data (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable) also contributes to the academic impact of our research.

Quality of research is safeguarded in research teams and through collegial peer feedback at USG research days and research groups meetings. In assessment of quality of individual research performance, we aim to concentrate on the assessment of the viability and impact of research *agendas* and *portfolio's* rather than single outputs. We stimulate staff members to develop such agendas and to develop strategies for academic impact, such as a careful selection of publication outlets; active communication of research findings; open science publications and fair data practices. Performance assessments in B&O conversations, appointments and promotions are not based on metrics, but on innovative research agendas and (in later career stages) academic and societal impact realized through these agendas. Pursuing a Senior Research Qualification can assist these assessments.

For transparent comparison and allocation of first-tier research time, a form of soft quantification remains necessary. We will maintain our *baseline publication norm* that allows to develop mature research agendas by providing a long-time horizon (five years) and a point system that values different types of publications, including publications directed towards an academic as well as a professional audience. We do not maintain a distinction between 'academic' and 'third-stream' research in quality assessment. *All* our research is academic research, subject to norms of academic quality. In line with UU's Triple model for performance assessment, we aim for a diversified publication portfolio directed to academic, professional/policy, and public audiences at team level. Individual staff members can develop profiles directed to academic or societal impact or combinations.

Societal impact can take many shapes and is difficult to assess its quality. Quantitative measurements, such as number of media performances, are poor indicators of quality and risk missing out contributions to social change that are less visible. In the coming years, we aim to develop quality

¹ G. Sharma and P. Bansal, 2020: Cocreating Rigorous and Relevant Knowledge. *AMJ*, 63, 386–410, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2016.0487>

indicators and measurements for the societal impact of our research (e.g., influence on processes, policy, strategy, decisions, education; follow-up research within and outside the chain; positions in e.g., advisory boards, panels etc). Quality review of consultancy projects and research reports; peer assessments; research team reflections and societal recognition can be used as indicators. We aim to monitor the use of our knowledge by societal stakeholders more actively by collecting evidence for this. An overview of quality indicators can be found in the appendix.

Objective 3: Develop multi-dimensional, dialogue-based practices of performance assessment in connection with academic and societal partners, informed by meaningful indicators.

■ Research themes: Governance and organisation of sustainability, inclusion and digitalisation

Sustainability – defined here as meeting the needs for the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs – requires adaptation of our way of living. While often conceptualised as a technological process; sustainability involves enhancing the adaptive capacity of society, humans, and institutions to deal with unexpected and unpredictable future changes and vulnerabilities (IPCC, 2007). This is a transformation- and organisational challenge with many participating actors, conflicts and controversies, and uncertainties. The slow progress of this change demonstrates that existing governance systems and organisations, at global, national, and local level, seem unable to adequately govern this transformation process. A critical rethinking of how adaptation processes are organized is urgent. This is also reflected in Utrecht University's strategic theme Pathways to Sustainability which aims to identify and understand transformative pathways.

Inclusion is the accessibility of institutions (such as democratic participation and the labour market), the promotion of equal opportunities, and the respect for people with various identities. Inclusion is an important (public) value that guides public organisations in their interaction with external and internal stakeholders. The concept of inclusion is much debated in the literature resulting in a plethora of definitions. Here, we follow Mor Barak & Cherin (1998 p.48) who provide a broad and non-normative definition: 'the degree to which individuals feel a part of critical ... processes such as access to information and resources, involvement in ... groups, and ability to influence the decision making process'.

The public domain can no longer be understood without taking the role of **digital technology** into account. Understanding the implications of technology is necessary to contribute to the strengthening of governance and organisation in the public domain. Dealing with processes of digitalisation adequately not only demands technical knowledge, but also knowledge and research in public administration and organisation science. Academic and societal debates often focus on technical expertise (Data science, information science) and increasingly also legal and ethical questions. Governance, management, and organisational knowledge is less prominent in this field but is essential to maintain public value in a digitalised society.

Digitalisation, sustainability, and inclusion are interrelated. Sustainability problems lead to energy poverty and marginalisation of vulnerable groups in society and increase polarisation and political tensions. Increasing digitalisation without taking sustainability into account, raises controversies with regard to the use of land and resources, and raises questions with regard to sustainable and inclusive organisation and employment practices. But digitalisation can also provide opportunities and solutions, increase access to institutions; and alternative practices of inclusion can arise out of local sustainability initiatives.

Public administration and organisation science can provide valuable contributions at the intersection of these topics. Currently, the research at USG on these three topics is somewhat incidental, fragmented and less visible. The impact of our research in academic networks, such as Utrecht University's strategic themes, UU/WUR/Eindhoven collaborations, and beyond, as well as societal impact, can be increased by making stronger connections with existing research collaborations. Thus, we can put our knowledge on political institutions; public management; behavioural interventions; organisation and employer engagement to work in interdisciplinary research collaborations with regard to sustainability; inclusion and digitalisation.

We want to make our current, somewhat fragmented research on these issues more visible, better coordinated, and better connected to external academic and societal networks to increase our impact. All five chairs at USG see opportunities and support the ambition to include these themes in their research agendas. There is a strong preference for a bottom up, voluntary strategy without re-allocating financial means. While we value autonomy, realisation of our academic ambition will also require leadership to strengthen our profile, and the creation of incentives to make it attractive to connect to relevant networks; increase impact and connect to education programmes. This will require an investment in terms of staff appointments.

Inclusion is already firmly embedded in USG research as a topic. Here, the challenge is to make existing efforts explicit and visible and connect them to Utrecht University research networks, and to more inclusive and open research practices.

Sustainability is a more long-term challenge and currently the least prominent theme. Stronger engagement with the Strategic theme 'Sustainability' is a major ambition for 2021 onwards. Here, more leadership and incentives need to be created to build a stronger and more coordinated research line with impact. The appointment of a Chair with a sustainability profile is necessary to provide visibility and direction and synergy between research groups and connect with a teaching programme on sustainability. Sustainability also has major implications for USG as an organisation.

Digitalisation poses fundamental challenges and changes to governance and organisations that run through all of USG's research themes, including sustainability and inclusion. It also has major implications for research methods. Research on digitalisation is already happening within USG and well connected to Utrecht University's wider networks. Here, the challenge is to embed and integrate digitisation-specific knowledge and research with existing research agendas to stimulate the innovation of these agendas.

We not only want to research sustainability and inclusion, but we also aim to research sustainably by developing more sustainable and inclusive research practices. Our organisational ambition is to adopt sustainable research practices with regard to international travel and open science practices towards participants in our research, users of our research and society. We will realise this through adopting and where possible being a first mover of UU's green policy; discouraging short (single-day) in-person visits of international guests that require air travel, for example for PhD defenses; guest lectures; or job interviews, and replace these by online visits or longer, more meaningful visits, and promoting international travel by train by communicating possibilities, nudging staff and guests to select train over air travel for shorter distances and sharing examples by peers.

Concrete objectives

- *Strengthening research and impact on sustainability by directing our existing research to new questions around governing (multiple) sustainability issues and investing in new staff*
- *Increasing the impact of the research on inclusion by more coordination and connection to Utrecht University's research networks*
- *Including questions on digitalisation of governance and organisation and their societal effects in research agendas, to remain relevant with regard to the fundamental transformation of society*
- *Increase the visibility and impact of our research on these topics by more proactive participation in transdisciplinary research hubs and networks; more communication and connections with teaching programmes*
- *Being recognised for expertise on the governance and organisation of sustainability; inclusion and digitalisation through visible and meaningful impact*