

Report on the evaluation of the  
Identités. Politiques, Sociétés, Espaces (IPSE)  
Research Unit at the University of Luxembourg

Based on a peer review as commissioned by the Ministry of Higher Education  
and Research of Luxembourg

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COMPANY INFORMATION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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1	INTRODUCTION	4
2	RESULTS OF THE EVALUATION	6
2.1	Overall assessment	6
2.2	Input	6
2.3	Output	7
2.4	Outcome and impact	10
2.5	Strategy for the future	10
3	SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS	13
3.1	Summary	13
3.2	Recommendations	13

## I INTRODUCTION

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The Ministry of Higher Education and Research (MESR) of Luxembourg mandated *Interface Policy Studies, Research, Consulting*, Switzerland, to organize and lead a research evaluation of the University of Luxembourg. Simultaneously, the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) of the European University Association carried out an institutional evaluation of the University of Luxembourg. The results of the IEP evaluation are published in a separate report.

The research evaluation was conducted in 2016 and followed two earlier evaluations carried out in 2008 and 2012.

The University of Luxembourg has three Faculties with research units conducting research in different scientific disciplines. In addition, there are three interdisciplinary centres.<sup>1</sup> The evaluation focused on the research performance of the University research units and interdisciplinary centres. This report presents the evaluation of the research unit *Identités. Politiques, Sociétés, Espaces* (IPSE).

The observations and recommendations presented in this report are based on a peer review by the following five experts working in the research unit's research fields:

- Desmond Dinan, PhD, professor of public policy at George Mason University, Arlington, VA, United States
- Elvira Glaser, PhD, professor of Germanic philology at the University of Zurich, Switzerland
- Stefan Gosepath, PhD, professor of philosophy and political theory at Freie Universität Berlin, Germany
- Olivier Graefe, PhD, professor of human geography at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland
- Jakob Vogel, professor of European history (19th & 20th century) at Sciences Po, Paris, France

The peer review consisted of a self-assessment report written by the IPSE and a hearing at the research unit that took place in September 2016. The evaluation assessed the period 2012 to 2015. The hearing, which was organized and moderated by Interface, consisted of a self-presentation by the research unit, a group discussion of the self-assessment report, and several individual and group interviews. These included interviews with representatives of the management team, professors, PhD candidates,<sup>2</sup> and further members of the research staff. Based on the experts' assessments, the report

<sup>1</sup> The Interdisciplinary Centre for Contemporary and Digital History was established in 2016. It is not part of the evaluation, as the assessed period is 2012 to 2015.

<sup>2</sup> The University of Luxembourg calls its PhD students 'PhD candidates'.

was finalized by Ueli Haefeli and Olivier Dolder of Interface. The report has been approved by the experts.

The overall results of all unit evaluations are summarized in a synthesis.<sup>3</sup> The synthesis report includes the findings from the interviews with representatives of the management team at the University of Luxembourg.

The report is divided into two parts: The first part discusses the expert team's observations gathered during the evaluation process. The focus is on the input, the output, and the outcome/impact of the research unit:

- *Input* includes the preconditions for the research conducted, such as strategies, financial and human resources, infrastructure, organization, and quality assurance systems.
- *Output* includes the performance of the research unit, exemplified through research results and their dissemination.
- *Outcome and impact* refer to the medium- and long-term effects as well as the relevance of the output on science, society, economy, and politics.

The second part presents the expert team's recommendations for further development of existing strengths and overcoming observed weaknesses.

*The evaluation team would like to thank everyone involved for preparing and implementing the hearing at the IPSE, for making the documentation available, and for participating in interviews.*

<sup>3</sup> Rieder, Stefan et al. (2017): Evaluation of the University of Luxembourg, Interface Policy Studies, Research Consulting, Lucerne.

## 2.1 OVERALL ASSESSMENT

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The expert team is very impressed by the development of the research unit IPSE since its creation in 2006. The IPSE has strengthened the humanities and social sciences within the University of Luxembourg. The research unit has been highly innovative in developing an interdisciplinary research and teaching culture. The IPSE has made significant contributions to Luxembourg society. The evaluation team encourages the research unit and the University to develop these achievements and strengths further.

## 2.2 INPUT

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### Research strategy

The IPSE contributes to two key research areas of the Faculty, namely, ‘Multilingualism and Intercultural Studies’ and ‘Sustainable Development’. In the opinion of the experts, the orientation towards interdisciplinarity and the two key research areas are strengths of the unit. With respect to interdisciplinarity, there is room for improvement. The idea of interdisciplinarity is well anchored in the unit – i.e. all interviewees mentioned it – but there is a need for more institutionalized or formalized interdisciplinarity. This could be achieved by providing incentives for team teaching or by establishing a professorship with a direct link to one or even both interdisciplinary key research areas. The IPSE’s two research facilitators offer potential to increase interdisciplinary research within the IPSE. Finally, in the experts’ view the current doctoral school is a good example of institutionalized interdisciplinarity.

### Human and financial resources, infrastructure, and equipment

In general, the research unit has excellent infrastructure and is in a very good situation regarding human and financial resources. The staff members are highly motivated, and the University provides excellent working atmosphere and conditions. Nevertheless, the expert team identified three shortcomings: First, the research unit’s administration is extremely understaffed. In the experts’ view, four full time equivalent (FTE) is not enough for a large research unit like the IPSE, especially if the University strongly encourages staff to seek outside funding. Second, the University devotes little effort to reconciling work and family life, which is very important for attracting excellent researchers with families. For example, it offers no child care and has not implemented a dual-career model. Especially for PhD candidates and young researchers in general, it is extremely challenging to have children during their dissertation or qualification period. Third, there is an imbalance of male and female full professors.

### Organization

The experts learned that the current organizational structure is the result of a historic development. Originally, to foster interdisciplinary research, the IPSE had no subunits. Due to its growth, the research unit decided to create subunits (i.e. institutes). The experts see the necessity for such subunits, but they see room for improvement regarding communication of the research unit’s disciplinary structure. The seven institutes in

combination with the interdisciplinary key research areas, other transversal programs, and the new Interdisciplinary Centre for Contemporary and Digital History at the University may be confusing for internal as well as external persons and can hinder the international visibility of the IPSE.

#### External research collaborations and service provision

The research unit has different research collaborations with other universities and within projects funded by foreign agencies, such as the French National Research Agency (ANR). There are also various collaborations within different master's degree programmes (e.g. the trinational master's programme 'Literary, Cultural and Language History of German-Speaking Regions' in Metz, Saarbrücken, and Luxembourg). Nevertheless, the unit lacks a clear internationalization strategy. The IPSE actively collaborates with national institutions to ensure knowledge transfer to society (see section 2.5 below). The experts see some potential for development of provision of services to the public administration (i.e. contract research on behalf of the government). But they also point out that such activities should not create direct competition between the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER) and the IPSE. On the contrary, the experts encourage IPSE to identify and develop synergies regarding contract research.

#### Quality assurance system

The IPSE disposes of several quality assurance tools, such as the Project Advisory Panel, internal information sessions, and pre-submission feedback from the research facilitators on all project proposals to the authors of the respective proposals. The Project Advisory Panel is one of the main quality assurance instruments. In the opinion of the expert team, the panel's work is a positive and helpful tool. Nevertheless, the panel is only reactive: The researchers have to address the panel. In the experts' view, the panel should become proactive and identify potential for collaboration within and outside of the IPSE. The expert team points out that the IPSE doctoral school is also an important quality assurance tool, even though it was not listed in the self-assessment report as a quality assurance instrument.

## 2.3 OUTPUT

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In general, the evaluation team rated the output of the research unit very positively. The IPSE has a good publication record and several well-known researchers. Understandably, there are some differences among the subunits. The IPSE is successful not only in publishing in peer-reviewed international journals but also in editing books. In some fields, the research unit is exceptionally innovative. The researchers organize many international conferences and are active on several editorial boards. A very high number of PhD theses were written and published in the evaluation period 2012–2015. In the opinion of the team of experts, a strength of the research unit is its focus on Luxembourg, which should be made even stronger. With its multilingualism and small size, Luxembourg offers an ideal environment for in-depth investigation of important cultural, socio-economic, and/or political phenomena that are also of increasing international interest. Finally, the IPSE shows room for improvement regarding its international visibility as a research entity.

In the following sections, the quality and quantity of research output are evaluated separately for the different research fields. The fields are evaluated individually due to the heterogeneity of the research fields and the competences of the expert team. It has to be noted that the IPSE is a well-performing interdisciplinary research unit that builds on disciplinary institutes. Therefore, the experts point out that these individual evaluations can only be understood as a part of the overall IPSE evaluation and must not be interpreted individually.

#### Geography

The Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning has increased in terms of personnel in the evaluation period, especially due to the successful acquisition of third party funding. There was also a massive increase in publications; the institute nearly doubled its publications from 2012 to 2015. The expert team is therefore of the opinion that the institute has performed above average. It has published in very good journals. The professors are well known in their research areas.

#### History

According to the experts, the Institute for History has acquired a very good academic reputation, especially in the fields of long-term European history, regional and Luxembourgish history, and migration history. The institute has contributed greatly to the IPSE in the different fields and key areas, providing a long-term historical perspective. Its output in terms of publications is – in an international perspective – on a good middle-range level, with some particularly dynamic researchers and others more engaged in administrative work for the institute or the Faculty and teaching. Unfortunately, some of the more dynamic researchers in contemporary history have recently been transferred to the newly created Centre for Contemporary and Digital History. The Institute for History is particularly strong in PhD supervision and has a good record of third party funding. It is well connected both on a national level with local cultural institutions, such as museums and archives, and on an international level, particularly in the broader region.

#### Language, Literature, Art, and Media

There are three institutes dealing with languages and literature, namely, the Institute of Luxembourgish Language and Literatures, the Institute of German Language, Literature and for Intercultural Studies, and the Institute for Romance, Media and Art Studies. These three institutes conduct research in quite different fields, and they also show different strengths and weaknesses. However, they collaborate on conferences and publications on IPSE subjects.

The Institute of Luxembourgish Language and Literatures can be described as a young and very innovative institute having a clear vision for the future and producing very good results. The members have produced several high quality books in the last period, and several PhD theses on IPSE-related themes have been completed. The (larger) linguistics group has a very good reputation in the scientific community. Some members are very active in trying to acquire third party funding; unfortunately, their recent application for a project within Horizon 2020 was not successful. At present, two international projects with universities in Germany and Switzerland are ongoing. The literature group, with its recently appointed associate professor, is also very dynamic; it is



working on its own profile, is embedded in international research, and has a strong impact on the Luxembourgish society. A comparison of the institute to another institute is not possible, because it is the only institute especially devoted to Luxembourgish studies.

The Institute of German Language, Literature and for Intercultural Studies has contributed greatly to the Faculty's key research area Multilingualism, especially the (larger) literature division, in addition to focusing on more traditional topics, chiefly German linguistics. The literature division is strong in PhD supervision (in linguistics, there is also a tandem dissertation together with Luxembourgish studies), and the quantity of publications is in general fairly good, given that the professors are also highly engaged in administrative work for the Faculty. The institute also hosts an interdisciplinary peer-reviewed scientific journal. With its trinational master's degree programme, the institute is well connected with other universities. Given the great number of (mostly larger) institutes of German studies outside Luxembourg, it does not come as a surprise that, compared to these, the institute is less well known. However, some students come from outside Luxembourg, attracted by the multilingual orientation of German studies. Ensuring the integration of the new professor of didactics into the research agenda of the IPSE represents a great opportunity. As the experts are not familiar with literature studies, it is hard for them to evaluate the overall quality of the publications.

The Institute for Romance, Media and Art Studies (IRMA) covers a broad range of research combining various methodological approaches. Its members work in international networks. Two of its members codirect the peer-reviewed journal *Signata*. Well-developed contacts with local institutions as the *Centre national de l'audiovisuel* and the organization of many events are a particular strength of the institute. Although a member of the institute has the lead of the key area Multilingualism and Intercultural Studies, connections with other IPSE institutes could be made stronger. The low third party funding rate, however, is a weakness of this institute and is difficult to overcome, given the new financing rules of the Luxembourg National Research Fund (FNR). The small team, which lost some posts due to fixed-term contracts, will have to gain advantage from the integration of the new professor of literature into their research agenda. The new planned key research area on material culture and visual studies can possibly move IRMA more into the forefront of the IPSE. The expert team points out that it is not able to evaluate the institute's great number of publications in detail due to the review team's limited expertise in this field.

#### Philosophy

In the expert team's view, the Institute of Philosophy performs well, given its very limited resources. The institute lost staff during the evaluation period. In 2015, there were only three professors and five PhD candidates at the institute, which, according to the experts, is a minimal size for a unit of this kind. The experts were surprised that there are no postdoc positions at the institute.

The institute is strongly marked by German philosophical culture, with one of its key research areas being German idealism (Kant to Hegel). Most of the professors at the institute are well known at least in the German-speaking scientific community and

have published in good journals, partly in internationally top-ranked journals in the respective fields, such as for example in *Kant-Studien*.

#### Political Science

In the experts' view, the Institute of Political Science provides solid research but is not a top-ranking political science department internationally. However, the institute has some excellent publications in first-rate journals, especially due to the successful hiring of a leading professor in 2012. The following figures show the solid performance of and the successful hiring in the political science institute: The staff decreased from 18 FTE in 2012 to 13 FTE in 2015, but the number of publications increased from 24 to 54 per year in the same period. The institute contains a number of staff at different levels; there is a striking discrepancy in achievement between most staff and the leading researchers.

## 2.4 OUTCOME AND IMPACT

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In the experts' view, the scientific impact is very difficult to measure, especially in the field of the humanities. The experts point out that the IPSE and its researchers are now well established in the broader scientific community and that some of the researchers are very well known. This is a success for a research unit that was founded only 10 years ago. Nevertheless, the IPSE as an entity is not very well known.

The impact on Luxembourg society by IRMA and the Institute of History is impressive. IRMA collaborates intensively with local museums and other centres in the domain of culture and art. The historians have a well-known Twitter account on the First World War (@RealTimeWW1); they were even a source of information for the political decision to establish a new interdisciplinary centre at the University of Luxembourg.

## 2.5 STRATEGY FOR THE FUTURE

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The expert team is well aware that strategic development is particularly challenging for the IPSE due to its constantly evolving environment, exemplified by the creation of Interdisciplinary Centre for Contemporary and Digital History, the modification of the FNR funding scheme for PhD candidates, and the University's internal budget restrictions. The research unit presented some ideas on how to develop in the future. Nevertheless, in the experts' view, the strategy needs to be sharpened, especially regarding the following four points:

*First*, due to a political decision in the summer of 2016, the Institute for History (and with it the IPSE) lost some very dynamic researchers in contemporary history to the newly created Interdisciplinary Centre for Contemporary and Digital History. This presents a major challenge for the institute. This is particularly problematic in that some members will retire in the coming years and replacement of their posts by the University is not clearly assured.

It is absolutely understandable to the experts that the Institute for History could not, in this context, present a clear vision of its research strategy for the next years.<sup>4</sup> However, its plan to develop a new key research area on material culture and visual studies is certainly a very good way to further develop research at the Institute of History in the IPSE. Still, the IPSE as an entity needs to have a clear strategy on how to position itself against the newly created interdisciplinary centre. In particular, this strategy needs to address digital issues, since the interdisciplinary centre will host a digital humanities unit.

Moreover, the Institute for History needs to have clear ideas on how to replace vacancies due to upcoming retirements. The recruitment of new permanent members with a strong research record seems particularly important in the current context in order to foster the research contribution of the institute to the research areas of the IPSE and to link it to some particularly innovative trends of current historiography, especially in the fields of comparative and transnational history. Here, a clear strategy is needed that suits the interests of both the institute and the IPSE. A possible profile in this respect would be, for instance, a researcher in the field of economic/environmental history connecting the economic history of the region to broader European and global dynamics, which could provide the necessary historical expertise to the key research area of the Faculty, Sustainable Development. Another possible profile could be in the field of a comparative history of small states and the practices of governance in the period from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which could both open up research perspectives in the regional/Luxembourgish history and engage in the IPSE context with political scientists and philosophers.

*Second*, the Institute of Philosophy does not seem to be as integrated in the IPSE as it could be. The experts see four clear possibilities to create more and deeper cooperation between the Institute of Philosophy and the other institutes of the IPSE: (1) Collaboration with political science should and could easily be strengthened; (2) The IPSE could use some meta-reflection upon its interdisciplinarity. This would be the classical role of philosophy of science that can be provided by some members of the institute; (3) To facilitate and strengthen the integration of philosophy into the IPSE, the expert team recommends that the IPSE bring more normative questions to the forefront of its interdisciplinary research agenda. This would be an advantage for the IPSE itself and would help the Institute of Philosophy, which by nature is mostly concerned with normative issues, to participate more extensively in the IPSE's research areas; (4) The experts support the current efforts of the institute to acquire a new position for a full professor in ethics and bioethics. This would lead to interdisciplinary collaboration with the natural sciences. The expert team encourages the IPSE and in particular the Institute of Philosophy to recruit a person from a culture other than the German culture to strengthen the internationality of the Institute of Philosophy.

<sup>4</sup> It has to be noted that the Interdisciplinary Centre for Contemporary and Digital History was officially founded only a few days before the hearing (1 September 2017) and that staff officially moved from the Institute to the Centre only on 1 January 2017. The expert team was informed by the Institute for History in January 2017 that only 15 of 54 members moved from the Institute to the Centre and that the Institute developed a clear strategy.

*Third*, the link between IPSE's contribution to the two key research areas of the Faculty (i.e. Sustainable Development, Multilingualism and Intercultural Studies) and the transversal programmes (e.g. border studies or Luxembourg studies) did not become entirely clear to the experts. In the experts' view, the IPSE should clarify and simplify its internal research organization. For example, border studies could be integrated into one or both of the key research areas. Furthermore, the IPSE presented the idea to develop a third key research area on material culture and visual studies. The expert team supports this idea. This research area would facilitate the integration of further IPSE institutes into research within key areas.

*Fourth*, the experts identified a reasonable strategy with respect to the acquisition of new research projects and grants. IPSE members were only partially successful in the last period, especially with respect to European programmes. The experts are aware that it is a great challenge for fundamental research in the humanities to acquire EU grant money. Nonetheless, IPSE members plan to submit new grant applications, and the experts are optimistic that at least some will be successful. The expert team supports a moderate strategy with respect to these time-consuming application procedures.

### 3.1 SUMMARY

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Since its creation in 2006, the IPSE has shown an impressive development. The research unit has developed an interdisciplinary research culture and has strengthened the humanities and social sciences within the University of Luxembourg. Nevertheless, interdisciplinarity should become more institutionalized within the research unit.

The evaluation team assesses the research output very positively: The IPSE has a good publication record and some internationally renowned scholars. Nevertheless, there are some differences in output among the subunits, and overall, the international visibility of the brand ‘IPSE’ is low. The research unit’s focus on Luxembourg is in the opinion of the expert group a strength and offers potential for further development. Moreover, the IPSE has made important contributions to Luxembourg society in the period under evaluation.

The research unit provides good working conditions and an engaging intellectual environment. Nevertheless, the administration is clearly understaffed, and there is an imbalance of male and female full professors as well as a lack of efforts to reconcile work and family. The expert team sees the necessity for the seven disciplinary subunits but encourages the research unit to better communicate its organizational structure. The IPSE lacks an internationalization strategy, although the research unit has notable research collaborations throughout Europe. The Project Advisory Panel is a very positive and helpful tool of quality assurance.

In summary, the evaluation team encourages the IPSE to build on its achievements and strengths and to sharpen its strategy for the challenging future.

### 3.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

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Based on the observations stated above, the expert team formulates the following recommendations for the research unit, the University, and the MESR.

**Recommendation 1: Consolidate and strengthen the interdisciplinary foci**

The interdisciplinarity orientation of the IPSE is a strength of the research unit. Therefore, the experts recommend that IPSE should consolidate and strengthen its interdisciplinary foci, for instance by developing a new IPSE research project dealing with current major political, socio-economic, and cultural challenges having local, regional, and global implications.

Since it is more difficult to publish interdisciplinary than disciplinary work in peer-reviewed – and mostly disciplinary – journals, the experts further recommend that the IPSE should continue to publish in edited books and should initiate special issues in diverse journals in order to strengthen the interdisciplinary work within the IPSE. Fur-

ther, incentives should be created for scholars doing interdisciplinary team teaching. Finally, the IPSE should utilize the potential of the new PRIDE doctoral training unit,<sup>5</sup> the Project Advisory Panel, and the research facilitators to consolidate and strengthen interdisciplinarity.

#### Recommendation 2: Sharpen the strategy

The current strategic ideas of the IPSE reflect a challenging and dynamic environment, including the creation of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Contemporary and Digital at the University, the modification of the FNR funding scheme for PhD candidates, and the University's internal budget restrictions. The experts support the strategic ideas, especially the planned third key research on material culture and visual studies. Nevertheless, the strategy has to be sharpened. For example, the new Interdisciplinary Centre for Contemporary and Digital History is both a challenge and an opportunity for the IPSE. The experts recommend that the IPSE develop a clear strategy on how to position itself vis-à-vis the centre and how to collaborate with it in research and teaching.

#### Recommendation 3: Develop a clear strategy on staff development consistent with the research agenda

The IPSE lacks a clear staff development strategy. A staff development strategy is important in general and particularly important in the current situation. The IPSE has to position itself vis-à-vis the new Interdisciplinary Centre for Contemporary and Digital History, has to plan the replacement of some professors due to upcoming retirements, and needs to strengthen its interdisciplinarity. Therefore, the experts recommend that the IPSE formulate a clear staff development strategy consistent with its (future) research strategy.

#### Recommendation 4: Strengthen support of the IPSE

The IPSE has strengthened the humanities and social sciences within the University of Luxembourg and has therefore contributed to the University as a whole. To be able to fulfil its important research agenda, the IPSE needs the continuing support of the University and MESR with respect to financing jobs (in the near future, some important professors have to be replaced) and infrastructure. Therefore, the experts highly recommend that the University and MESR continue and strengthen their support of the IPSE.

#### Recommendation 5: Increase the external visibility of the IPSE

The experts recommend that the IPSE increase its external visibility. Although several IPSE scholars are well known in their scientific communities, the IPSE as a research unit still lacks visibility in the international scientific community as well as in the broader Luxembourg society. In the experts' view, the IPSE can increase its visibility through: (1) clarification and simplification of the internal research organization, (2) scientific excellence as well as internal and external research collaborations,

<sup>5</sup> PRIDE is the programme of the FNR for funding doctoral research in Luxembourg. Under this programme, a block of PhD grants is awarded to a consortium of excellent researchers grouped around a coherent research and training programme (see <[www.fnr.lu](http://www.fnr.lu)>).

(3) intensified media work, and (4) an IPSE book series with edited interdisciplinary volumes.

**Recommendation 6: Increase the impact of Luxembourg studies beyond a regional focus to the broader European and global levels**

Due to its multilingualism and small size, Luxembourg offers an ideal environment to investigate in detail cultural, socio-economic, and/or political phenomena that are currently of pressing European and global interest. Hence, the expert team recommends that the IPSE increase the visibility and impact of Luxembourg studies beyond a regional focus to the broader European and global levels by showing more explicitly the contribution of the studies to the international methodological, conceptual, or theoretical debates.

**Recommendation 7: Encourage more appointments of women to full professorships and elaborate a concept to reconcile work and family life**

There is an imbalance of male and female full professors within the IPSE. The University has no child care centre and has not implemented a dual-career model. The experts recommend that the IPSE encourage more appointments of women to full professorships and elaborate, together with the University, a concept to reconcile work and family life.

**Recommendation 8: Rethink some formal regulations on the PhD level**

The obligation to finish a PhD within four years can be challenging for PhD candidates in the humanities and social sciences. It can also hinder international mobility of the candidates and result in a loss to the University of good candidates, who may finish their PhDs at another university after four years in Luxembourg. The experts recommend rethinking this very strict four-year limit and suggest, for example, not counting research stays abroad or preparing for the PhD defence towards the four-year limit.<sup>6</sup>

**Recommendation 9: Increase administrative staff**

The administration of the IPSE is extremely understaffed with only four FTE for administrative and research facilitation work. The expert team therefore recommends increasing the number of administrative staff at the IPSE. With more administrative staff, the IPSE website could be improved and kept up to date, the administration could better support IPSE members in the acquisition of important third party funding, and finally, researchers could invest more time in research.

<sup>6</sup> The official limit is only three years, with a fourth year being generally granted upon request.