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Evaluation of the Research Part of the University of Luxembourg: Evaluation Report

Department of Humanities (DHUM)



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Professor Svend Erik Larsen (chair), Professor Helena Buescu, Professor Stefan Helgesson, Professor Tatjana Jukić,
Professor Claudia Weber

Executive Summary

Following the previous international assessment the young University of Luxembourg (UL) began a process of reorganisation and strategic reorientation which is still underway. The present structure of DHUM was established in 2020 within the Faculty of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences as an integral part of the process. The overall aim of this evaluation is to contribute to the ongoing process through the recommendations presented in the report.

In an international context DHUM is a small Department. However, it is one of UL's largest departments with seven institutes (Philosophy, History, Multilingualism, German Studies, English Studies, Romance Studies, and Luxembourg Studies), to which is added Parliament Studies affiliated with the Institute of Philosophy. In alignment with the general UL strategy, the research activities are framed by two overarching strategic research fields: Socio-Cultural Dynamics and Digital & Media Transformation, to be developed within and across the institutes by four core disciplines: History, Linguistics/Multilingualism, Literary and Cultural Studies, and Philosophy. To this is added a transversal research area – Research on Luxembourg – with a broader remit than the Institute of Luxembourg Studies, which concentrates on language and literature. One institute, Romance Studies, integrates Visual Studies and, like German Studies, also Media Studies. The new support unit – The Culture and Computation Lab (CuCoLab) – is being built up as a cross-departmental unit with a particular remit to nurture the new research field Digital & Media Transformation.

The Panel recognises that the structure is a pragmatic solution to problems arising from the process of reorganisation and the demands defined by BA and MA programmes, described on the website of DHUM, the Faculty and UL. However, DHUM is in need of a future-oriented strategy for research coordination across institutes, disciplines and other units inside and outside the Department, as well as for infrastructure. Such a strategic endeavour can also strengthen international collaboration beyond its present predominant basis in individual engagement and regional profile.

The quantity and quality of DHUM's research output is impressive. Theoretical and methodological reflection form a solid basis for an ambitious strategy for joint research projects and sustainable international cooperation, as well as for increasing access to competitive international funding. After the site visit, the Panel is convinced that the commitment and collegial culture of DHUM have created a collaborative spirit that can both formulate and realise such strategies.

DHUM is the centre for various kinds of research based academic and non-academic outreach, involving local museums, libraries and archives as well as addressing a broader public. However, a concerted strategic effort should be considered to secure time and funding for long-term individual and collective curiosity-driven fundamental research.

The Panel's recommendations mainly concern three areas and are specified in the subsections of the report, with the aim of further strengthening the ongoing strategic research planning of the Department:

1. Strategies regarding structure and infrastructure.
2. Strategies regarding internationalisation.
3. Strategies regarding fundamental research.

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1 Introduction and background

1.1 Introduction to the evaluation

The Ministry of Research and Higher Education (MESR) of Luxembourg mandated Technopolis Group with the evaluation of the research part of the University of Luxembourg. This evaluation was conducted from May 2024 to June 2025. According to Art. 50/2 of the modified law on the organisation of the University of Luxembourg of June 27th, 2018, based on the original law of 2003, the University is subject to external evaluation every four years, the present evaluation assesses both the research and institutional aspects of the University. The main time period to be covered by this exercise is 2018-2023. Next to a retrospective assessment of achievements, the evaluation's prospective elements include the evaluation of the strategies and plans of the University as well as the evaluators and the panel assessment of challenges and opportunities ahead.

The University's mission, as defined by law, is threefold: to offer higher education courses leading to degrees, diplomas and certificates; to conduct research; and to contribute to the social, cultural and economic development of Luxembourg.

This report is part of the assessment of the research performance of the University's 13 research departments and three interdisciplinary centres, and covers the Department of Humanities (DHUM), part of the Faculty of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences (FHSE). The evaluation is based on international external peer review and covers the performance of the research department, taking into account various aspects such as inputs (e.g., finances, human resources, infrastructure, strategy) and outputs/impacts (e.g., research outcomes, innovation activities, services). A separate report covers the assessment of organisation, management, and governance matters.

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

- Chair: Prof. Svend Erik Larsen, Professor Emeritus of Aarhus University, Denmark, Member of Academia Europaea
- Prof. Helena Buescu, Professor of Comparative Literature, University of Lisbon, Portugal, Member of Academia Europaea
- Prof. Stefan Helgesson, Professor of English Literature Studies, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Deputy Vice President for Human Sciences, Stockholm University, Sweden, Member of Academia Europaea
- Prof. Tatjana Jukić, Professor of English Literature, University of Zagreb, Croatia, Member of Academia Europaea
- Prof. Claudia Weber, Professor for Contemporary European History, European University Viadrina Frankfurt, Germany

The assessment is based on a self-evaluation report submitted by the Department, background information on the Luxembourg research system information provided by Technopolis Group, and an on-site visit of the Department in January 2025. The visit, which was organised and moderated by Technopolis, consisted of a self-presentation by the Department and its institutes, as well as group interviews with staff, doctoral students and external stakeholders.

The committee applied the following evaluation criteria and organised the present report accordingly: quality of the research, impact of the research (third mission), and future potential of the research in the Department.

The evaluation team would like to thank all those who helped us prepare the evaluation, those who provided information and those who were interviewed during the consultation.

1.2 The Department

DHUM carries out research in History, Linguistics/Multilingualism, Literary and Cultural Studies, and Philosophy under the transversal themes of Cultural and Social Dynamics, Digital & Media Transformation and Research on Luxembourg. The Department is organised in seven institutes (Philosophy, History, Multilingualism, German Studies, English Studies, Romance Studies, and Luxembourg Studies) with one additional unit, the Cultural and Computation Lab (CuCoLab), and Visual Studies integrated in Romance Studies.

The Department has, according to the self-assessment, a staff of 66 FTE (among them 10 full professors, 14 associate professors, 13 assistant professors). Between 2018-23, it reports more than 1.500 publications of which ca. 2/3 are peer reviewed, including authored/edited books, journal articles, and book chapters. On average, the Department produced around 15 PhD graduates per year. Apart from state endowment, which increased from €7.8m in 2018 to €11.3m in 2023, it has on average secured around €1.5m in competitive FNR funding and another €600k from other national sources. International funding is much lower (less than €100k in each year reported).

2 Research strategy and organisation

Being built up by seven basic institutes shaped around teaching obligations plus one added unit (CuCoLab), DHUM sets itself very broad goals, running the risk of losing focus. Compared with other international humanities departments, DHUM has a limited number of staff and faces challenges with recruitment and post-retirement replacements. Although the Panel is impressed by the ambitions and the shared strategic awareness that drive all members of the Department, a further streamlining of the structure to minimise overlaps between institutes combined with improved coordination between their activities is encouraged in order to reduce the fragmentation of research and create more time and space for curiosity-driven research over and above the applied research involved in the important knowledge transfer activities of DHUM in teaching and broader outreach.

The Institute of Luxembourg Studies has a clear focus on language and literature, but its relation to the overall engagement with research on Luxembourg, across the institutes and across departments is not clear. Multilingualism, translation studies and low-resource languages are topics of importance also to the Institute of Multilingualism, for example. The Luxembourg focus has in other words the potential to be integrated in research with a broad theoretical and methodological scope, thereby strengthening DHUM's international relevance without sacrificing its local anchorage. Coordination is needed to optimise the results of this highly relevant research focus.

The new research field of Digital & Media Transformation rests on a series of separate units, both within and beyond the department: media studies in the Institutes of German and the Romance Studies; the Culture and Computation Lab, which has a precarious staffing situation; the existing IT facilities and providers of technical expertise across UL; a new UL unit on Digital Ethics; the Centre for Digital and Contemporary History; two new DHUM hires at associate professor level; research in informatics and media technology in other departments or faculties. In this area, too, coordination is required to support the advertised MA programme in Media Studies and to position the department within this interdisciplinary and well-financed research

field internationally, which is still growing and is increasingly competitive. A coordinated effort would also contribute to highlighting the indispensable role of the competences developed in Humanities research internationally in the burgeoning field of AI, like textual processing, creative arts and communication, education, ethics, multilingualism to the benefit of the national and international position of UL as a whole.

The self-evaluations of DHUM and UL clearly reflect the need to focus activities on selected strong areas with a potential for making a difference in Luxembourg and enhance the attraction to larger international partners.

Recommendations:

- *Internal coordination:* Better coordination is called for to optimise the Department's research potential. We recommend that DHUM invites the staff preparing or intending to prepare larger projects to form an open-structure brainstorming group, meeting on a regular basis to discuss current collaborative and interdisciplinary projects and applications across institutes and departments. To support DHUM's two research facilitators, this group could also advise on research contents of their colleagues' broader project applications.
- *Structure:* It is advisable to investigate opportunities to merge some of the institutes, less in line with the requirements of the teaching programmes, but rather with the aim of strengthening the interdisciplinarity of research, which is one of the hall marks of DHUM, so that the three overarching areas become the corner stones of the departmental structure: Cultural and Social Dynamics; Digital & Media Transformation; Research on Luxembourg.
- *Internationalisation:* The existing research collaborations with international partners are mainly based on individuals participating in various projects launched and hosted by universities and research units abroad in the Euro-American region. Given the cultural and linguistic demography of Luxembourg there is also a potential for engaging with partners on other continents. An internationalisation strategy with two goals is recommended: (1) development of collective interdisciplinary and international projects with the potential to attract international funding and having DHUM as the host institution; (2) establishment of sustainable institutional agreements with international universities for recurrent joined research projects, access to research facilities like IT labs and various forms of exchange of researchers and students.

3 Quality of Research

DHUM's self-evaluation provides ample demonstration of the quality of the research carried out at the Department, its breadth of scope and its impressive quantitative output. This information is supplemented by ten sample publications that exemplify research topics and quality of research. These come from all the institutes and all three transversal areas. They cover long historical periods as well as methodological and theoretical issues related to topics on the international research agenda.

The overview offered in two tables in the self-evaluation report (p. 9-10) lists about 1.500 publications produced by 69 staff members (head count, table p. 17) and doctoral students (some 90 doctoral theses). Contributions to blogs, working papers and similar in-house publications are also included but, according to the department, about 1.200 of those publications are scientific articles in journals or edited volumes, books or edited books. The tables indicate that about two thirds of them are peer reviewed.

The vast majority of the publications are articles and other shorter formats with few peer reviewed edited/co-edited volumes and very few peer reviewed monographs (the table includes translations in this category), of which one is included among the 10 submissions. The tables show that the traditional core disciplines of Humanities (Literary Studies, History and Linguistics) outnumber the others, with Arts, Education and Philosophy following close behind. This distribution documents that the focus area of Cultural and Social Dynamics is strongly embedded in DHUM's research activities, while the recently-created field of Digital & Media Transformation has yet to make its mark on the Department's publication profile. Research on Luxembourg is not singled out in the tables, forming part of the body of publications within the three dominant disciplinary domains of Literary Studies, Linguistics and History. The visible underrepresentation of Digital & Media Transformation seems to require a strategy to secure sufficient research time for the existing limited staff to establish the field within DHUM and to develop the necessary sustainable international contacts for the field to acquire an adequate volume.

In general, the ten samples demonstrate that there is sufficient research quality to substantiate further development of the core disciplines as well as the new area in Digital Humanities. The traditional fields are covered by solid research at a clear international level within branches of History, Literary and Cultural Studies, studies on Luxembourgish and regional topics and with innovative surveys and comprehensive in-depth theoretical and empirical studies, including one comprehensive monograph. The foreseeably fewer contributions within digital humanities, involving Parliament Studies, Linguistics and Visual Art, are original and promising for future development. However, eight of the ten contributions are single-authored. The co-authored articles are placed within the same disciplines, one of them being written by a member of DHUM and an international colleague; the other by three DHUM members and three international colleagues. Despite their research quality, the samples do not demonstrate a concerted strategic effort in the Department to turn interdisciplinarity into collaborative research practice.

Recommendations:

- *Digital & Media Transformation/Digital Humanities:* A strategy is needed to ensure the field at UL has sufficient staff and finances to enter international collaboration and to position Humanities as a constitutive component of digital studies at the faculty and university level.
- *Interdisciplinarity:* A strategy should be formulated to develop DHUM's goal to foster interdisciplinarity as a concrete and diversified collaborative research practice, not only within but across institutes and other national and international partners.

4 Resources

4.1 Financial resources and infrastructure

The Department relies almost entirely on national funding: the state endowment (€11.3m in 2023) and FNR (€1.6m), the latter obtained with a success rate of 25-30%. Finally, a minor part of the income is provided by international sources through participation in various projects (€69.5k). To this financial input is added income in kind from local institutional stakeholders providing important contributions to teaching, exhibition facilities etc.

The need for infrastructure is important for the Institute of Multilingualism (testing-space for research and for outreach), Institute of History (datasets) and the new initiatives within the area of Digital & Media Transformation. DHUM seems to have sufficient access to the IT-facilities of the Faculty, the National Archives, national IT facilities and open-source international platforms

for creating, monitoring and disseminating datasets to meet its needs. However, greater access and upgrades to facilities will be needed for further development of this emerging area. If DHUM creates a successful strategy for increased international cooperation, larger international funding and extended access to external digital and other lab facilities should result. At present, better coordination of the use and development of existing internal facilities as well as increasing the provision of resources to the CuCoLab are the most pressing issues.

Recommendation:

- *Infrastructure:* DHUM should take the initiative and coordinate access, use and development of IT infrastructure and IT units at faculty and university level to underpin the otherwise precarious internal situation for staffing and financing the emerging area of Digital & Media Transformation.

4.2 Human resources, careers, and related policies

The Department is understaffed for the existing teaching obligations related to BA and MA programmes and to third mission activities. This impedes the planning of longer periods of concentrated research for groups and individual staff members. UL's constraints on sabbaticals (one in seven years based on application and with a mandatory stay abroad) and rigid mobility options (tax laws among other things), research risks being an isolated individual activity done in short bursts across the year.

Lack of clarity regarding new hires and succession means tenure-track careers or tenured positions are difficult to plan, to the detriment of sustainable recruitment, especially in the emerging research area of Digital & Media Transformation. DHUM has a committed multilingual staff, many with an international background, follows successfully the UL policy for gender equality, shows a capacity for forward looking strategic planning, and is developing an improved PhD environment. However, clear career paths and guaranteed space for research and regular sabbaticals with a frequency of less than seven years and based on rotation and not application would enhance DHUM's position as an attractive academic employer. However, these issues cannot be resolved without Faculty and University commitment to change strategies and policies.

Two research facilitators have been allocated to DHUM to support funding-raising. Their contributions to application processes mainly concern formal aspects, including budgeting. It seems that researchers are alone when it comes to the content of their projects.

Recommendations:

- *Research periods:* Many problems regarding research planning for research groups and individual researchers cannot be solved by DHUM alone but will have to involve the Faculty and the University as well as national legislation. Yet, with the goal of creating space for flexible planning to improve the conditions for fundamental research, DHUM may be able to launch an initiative for a strategy shared by all parties involved.
- *Recruitment:* Strategies for career paths, recruitment, replacements and new hires to develop new areas also involve levels of governance beyond DHUM. To make UL an attractive working place in the international research context, the Department is advised to open discussions beyond DHUM to establish transparent cross-university principles in these areas.
- *Research facilitators:* To help write funding applications (especially international ones) more efficiently, the research facilitators should be supported by senior colleagues, current or retired, to advise applicants. If regulations prevent retired colleagues from being paid for

this purpose, it is strongly recommended to find ways to avoid losing their experience and expertise.

5 Contribution to teaching

DHUM hosts two BA programmes, which are subdivided into a number of language specific study tracks integrated in the seven institutes, and eleven MA programmes, to which are being added a MA in Parliament Studies and a MA in Media Studies still on the drawing board. Some of the programmes integrate external teaching resources from stakeholders. To this comes engagement in course work across the faculty and in other faculties and some additional courses (like Italian and Portuguese). New programmes have been added to cater to new educational demands, while some existing ones have been modified to address decreasing student numbers. DHUM offers doctoral programmes across the institutes, but the number of PhD candidates in the department has fallen from 110 in 2018 to 86 in 2023. Roughly half of these are funded by UL, and half are self-funded, with a few on contract from other Luxembourgish institutions. Ninety-three PhD candidates graduated during the evaluation period. A further 33 PhD projects were terminated during the period, 27 of them by the students themselves.

DHUM has recently developed a strong support system for doctoral students within the DSHSS that has both social and scholarly components. Interviews with students confirm their appreciation of the doctoral programme, including access to shared office space. However, accommodation in Luxembourg is expensive and hard to find. More important, clear career paths are missing.

The self-evaluation report is unambiguous: the many and varied teaching obligations and pastoral duties create a growing imbalance between teaching/outreach demands and research that threatens research time, not least the longer periods of time necessary for doing fundamental research.

Recommendation:

- *Teaching obligations:* DHUM is advised to consider ways to redefine teaching obligations to safeguard research time, perhaps with more overlaps among BA programmes and MA programmes, or by discontinuing some programmes.

6 Contribution to the third mission

DHUM is a very strong player in third mission activities in Luxembourg, offering innovative activities and products for a variety of stakeholder and citizen groups, based on shared interest and in some cases exchange of services. The list of activities and concrete examples provided by the self-evaluation report is impressive, and was applauded in our interviews with four institutional stakeholders during the site visit (The National Library, the Luxembourg City Museum, the National Literary Archives, and Parliament). During the interview with DHUM staff on knowledge transfer, further examples were added: improvement of language acquisition and learning for children and their families; exemplary open-source websites and apps; and a number of exhibitions. There is no doubt about DHUM's importance in Luxembourg for cultural life in the broadest possible sense. The third mission is an area of applied research that enhances the visibility in society, not only of DHUM but also of the University as a whole and thus supports the research policy and research investments of Luxembourg.

However, while third mission activities generate a high profile for applied research, over-emphasising this mission can have an adverse effect on fundamental research. The investment in time and resources on fundamental research is what makes applied science possible in the first place. Without a secure base for curiosity-driven fundamental research the instrumental benefits of function-driven applied research risk drying out. It will be hugely important for DHUM to have the necessary support from UL to maintain a sustainable balance between applied research for teaching and the third mission and the fundamental research on which it has to build its future.

Recommendation:

- *Balance:* DHUM is advised to create a strategy for focusing its engagement in third mission activities with criteria for how to balance its volume to secure sustainable time and space for fundamental research across the Department.

7 Overall assessment and recommendations

Based on the self-evaluation, the material provided by DHUM and the site visit, the Panel finds that the quantity and quality of DHUM's research output is impressive and the department has a clear understanding of its challenges. The SWOT analysis documents a productive self-reflection on the potential of the Department, a willingness to undertake reforms and a commitment to international outreach and local engagement in third mission activities. Combined with a supportive collegial culture and the quantity and quality of research output, the Panel see clear opportunities for further development of DHUM as a strong research unit. Our recommendations are formulated with an aim of encouraging DHUM as part of a young university to continue its efforts to establish itself as an important research unit in a national, regional and wider international context.

We group our recommendations under three headings:

1. Strategies regarding structure and infrastructure:
 - a. *Internal coordination:* Better coordination is called for to optimise the Department's research potential. We recommend that DHUM invites the staff preparing or intending to prepare larger projects to form an open-structure brainstorming group, meeting on a regular basis to discuss current collaborative and interdisciplinary projects and applications across institutes and departments. To support DHUM's two research facilitators, this group could also advise on research contents of their colleagues' broader project applications.
 - b. *Structure:* It is advisable to investigate opportunities to merge some of the institutes, less in line with the requirements of the teaching programmes, but rather with the aim of strengthening the interdisciplinarity of research, which is one of the hall marks of DHUM, so that the three overarching areas become the corner stones of the departmental structure: Cultural and Social Dynamics; Digital & Media Transformation; Research on Luxembourg.
 - c. *Infrastructure:* DHUM is advised to take the initiative to coordinate access, use and development of IT infrastructure and IT units at faculty and university level to underpin the otherwise precarious internal situation for the emerging area of Digital Humanities in particular.
 - d. *Digital & Media Transformation/Digital Humanities:* A strategy is needed to ensure the field at UL has sufficient staff and finances to enter international collaboration and to

position Humanities as a constitutive component of digital studies at the faculty and university level.

4. Internationalisation strategies:

- a. *Internationalisation*: The existing research collaborations with international partners are mainly based on individuals participating in various projects launched and hosted by universities and research units abroad in the Euro-American region. Given the cultural and linguistic demography of Luxembourg there is also a potential for engaging with partners on other continents. An internationalisation strategy with two goals is recommended: (1) development of collective interdisciplinary and international projects with the potential to attract international funding and with DHUM as the host institution; (2) establishment of sustainable institutional agreements with international universities for recurrent joint research projects, access to research facilities like IT labs and various forms of exchange of researchers and students

5. Strategies regarding fundamental research:

- a. *Research periods*: Many problems regarding research planning for research groups and individual researchers cannot be solved by DHUM alone but will have to involve the Faculty and the University as well as national legislation. Yet, with the goal of creating space for flexible planning to improve the conditions for fundamental research, DHUM may be able to launch an initiative for a strategy shared by all parties involved.
- b. *Recruitment*: Strategies for career paths, recruitment, replacements and new hires to develop new areas also involve levels of governance beyond DHUM. To make UL an attractive working place in the international research context, the Department is advised to open discussions with those levels to establish transparent cross-university principles in these areas.
- c. *Research facilitators*: To help write funding applications (especially international ones) more efficiently, the research facilitators should be supported by senior colleagues, current or retired, to advise applicants. If regulations prevent retired colleagues from being paid for this purpose, it is strongly recommended to find ways to avoid losing their experience and expertise.
- d. *Interdisciplinarity*: A strategy should be formulated to develop DHUM's goal to foster interdisciplinarity as a concrete and diversified collaborative research practice, not only within but across institutes and other national and international partners.
- e. *Teaching obligations*: DHUM is advised to consider ways to redefine teaching obligations to safeguard research time, perhaps with more overlaps among BA programmes and MA programmes, or by discontinuing some programmes.
- f. *Balance*: DHUM is advised to create a strategy for focusing its engagement in third mission activities with criteria for how to balance its volume to secure sustainable time and space for fundamental research across the Department.

