

EPISTEMIC PROGRESS IN THE UNIVERSITY

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1. MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION AND URGENCY

The big questions this project addresses is:

[How can universities enable epistemic progress—both policy-wise and in the humanities?](#)

We concentrate on two more specific sub-questions: Which institutional and policy arrangements and procedures foster responsible research practices, i.e. practices that enable epistemic progress, and how can such progress be measured? And: How can the humanities, theology included, realize epistemic progress?

The project does two things. First, it develops institutional policies and procedures for universities that facilitate epistemic progress. Specifically, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs, as we call them) for research integrity will be designed as well as training and support programs for mentors and supervisors. Second, it aims to contribute directly to epistemic progress in the humanities by carrying out replications of two cornerstone studies, by clarifying the nature of a prominent type of humanities explanations, namely non-causal explanations, by clarifying the relations between the sciences and the humanities, by writing a textbook on the philosophy of the humanities defending the possibility of progress in the humanities, and by articulating what progress in theology can amount to.

This project is important for two different reasons. First, the academic world has been shaken by reports about questionable research practices (QRPs) that are thought to be responsible for the replication crisis in certain fields of research (most notably social psychology and the bio-medical sciences.) Also, there are reports of cases of research misconduct (cases of fabrication and falsification of research data and plagiarism). This has led academic institutions all over the globe to develop codes for responsible research conduct. However, it is one thing to develop such codes, but quite another for them to have transforming effects. The research we propose is important precisely because it addresses further implementation.

Second, the project addresses the epistemic value and respectability of the humanities. In modern universities the humanities are, in the main, not valued as highly as the natural or the bio-medical sciences. In many countries the humanities and entire humanities departments are under threat. Still, the humanities are important, because they can give us knowledge and insights that cannot be obtained in other ways. It is the ambition of this project to explore and explain the possibilities of epistemic progress in the humanities, and to instantiate such progress itself.

This project is relevant to different groups of people: (1) University administrators and policy makers who are responsible for fostering responsible research practices; they can learn about and use the SOPs this project will develop. (2) University boards interested in measuring how well they are doing in meeting five core epistemic responsibilities. (3) The academic research integrity community. (4) Philosophers of science who are working

on the question whether replication studies in the humanities are possible, who are studying the relations between the various sciences, and who are working on non-causal explanations. (5) Professors teaching undergraduate courses in the humanities who are looking for a textbook treatment of what the humanities are and how they compare to the sciences. (6) The general public.

2. TEAM MEMBERS

Project Leaders

[Prof. dr. René van Woudenberg](#) (0.5 fte)

[Prof. dr. ir. Jeroen de Ridder](#) (0.2 fte)

[Dr. Rik Peels](#) (0.1 fte)

[Prof. dr. Lex Bouter](#) (0.5 fte)

[Dr. Joeri Tijdink](#) (0.2 fte)

[Dr. Gijsbert van den Brink](#) (0.2 fte)

Other Team Members

Research:

Iris Lechner MA (1.0 fte)

Roland den Boef MA (1.0 fte)

Dr. Vincent Traag (0.1 fte)

Postdoc (0.5 fte)

2 Postdocs (1 year, 1.0 fte)

Prof. Stephen Grimm

Project Manager

Samira van der Loo BSc (0.5 fte)

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE SUBPROJECTS

PART I. INSTITUTIONAL AND POLICY ASPECTS OF EPISTEMIC PROGRESS IN ACADEMIA

Part I of the project concerns institutional and policy aspects of epistemic progress in academia.

Project 1 Development and Implementation of a Normative Taxonomy for Universities

Prof. dr. Jeroen de Ridder, Prof. dr. René van Woudenberg, Dr. Rik Peels, Dr. Joeri Tijdink, Prof. dr. Lex Bouter, Iris Lechner MA

This subproject addresses the question of what epistemic progress consists in and how it can be assessed. It is the development and implementation of an assessment tool, as laid out in a previously published white paper (titled “Academia’s Big Five”).

Project 2 Individual and Collective Scientific Progress

Prof. dr. Jeroen de Ridder, Dr. Vincent Traag

This subproject studies what epistemic progress in science and the humanities amounts to. The subproject is centered around the following three questions: What is epistemic progress in science at the level of individual scientists and scholars? What is epistemic progress in science at the level of collectives, such as teams or even entire fields of science? How can we measure epistemic progress?

Project 3 Standard Operating Procedures for Research Integrity

Dr. Joeri Tijdink, Prof. dr. Lex Bouter

Subproject 3 focuses on responsible research practices, especially through the installment of standard operational procedures within research organizations. For this subproject, external funding from the European Union has been secured.

PART II. EPISTEMIC PROGRESS IN THE HUMANITIES

The projects in the second part address progress in the humanities: what it is and how it can be realized.

Project 4 Progress in the humanities: Replication of two cornerstone studies

Prof. dr. Lex Bouter, Prof. dr. René van Woudenberg, Dr. Rik Peels, two 1-year postdocs

This project discusses the idea of replication in the humanities and proposes two replication studies. Introducing replication studies in the humanities, we think, is a genuine case of epistemic progress.

Project 5 Progress in the Humanities: Non-constructivism, Realism, Explanation, Science

Prof. dr. René van Woudenberg, Dr. Rik Peels, Dr. Stephen Grimm, Roland den Boef MA

This subproject is premised on the idea that progress in the humanities depends, in part, on being clear about the nature of the non-causal explanations that we find in the humanities, and on being clear on how the humanities relate to the sciences and the social sciences.

Project 6 Is There Epistemic Progress in Theology – And Should There Be?

Dr. Gijsbert van den Brink

Subproject 6 explores the idea of epistemic progress in theology. This subproject investigates the claim that theology does not make epistemic progress by exploring, comparing and evaluating five avenues of response to this claim.

4. WHAT TO EXPECT FROM US

- Peer reviewed papers, monographs, edited volumes
- Popular talks, newspaper articles, interviews
- Website with a taxonomy tool for measuring epistemic responsibilities and their levels
- Three seminars:
 - Epistemic Progress in Theology
 - Epistemic Progress as a Group Effort
 - Epistemic Progress in the Humanities
- Workshops on replication studies, on philosophy of the humanities and on non-causal explanations
- Textbook on philosophy of the humanities

5. WE ARE OPEN TO COLLABORATION

Please share your research and teaching ideas with us!

Contact

Website www.abrahamkuypercenter.nl

Email abrahamkuypercenter@vu.nl

[Sign up for our newsletter](#) to stay updated about this research project and its events

The project will be executed from the Abraham Kuyper Center for Science and the Big Questions at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The Abraham Kuyper Center is part of the faculty of the humanities, the philosophy department.