

## NCCR On the Move Review Panel

### Short report on 5<sup>th</sup> Site Visit, 14 May 2019 at the University of Neuchâtel

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## 1. Introduction

The site visit of the fifth contract year was held on 14 May 2019 in an adapted format (paper sessions) and took place at the University of Neuchâtel (see programme).

Participants:

*Review Panel:* **Max Bergman** (Chair), SNSF Programmes Div.; **Katharina Michaelowa**, SNSF Programmes Div.; **Ayse Caglar**, Universität Wien, AT; **Franz Caspar**, SNSF Div. Humanities and Social Sciences; **Gil S. Epstein**, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, IL.; **Hill Kulu**, University of St. Andrews, UK; **Noel Salazar**, KU Leuven, BE; **Maarten Vink**, Maastricht University, NL.

*Excused:* **Gudela Grote** (Deputy Chair), SNSF Programmes Div.; **Rupert Brown**, University of Sussex, UK; **Susan Martin** (emerita), Georgetown University, Washington D.C., US.

*SNSF Staff:* **Thomas Griessen**, **Marc Zbinden**, **Marie Guyaz** (Division Social Sciences and Humanities).

*NCCR Scientific Committee / Network Office:* **Gianni D'Amato**, **Philippe Wanner**, **Wassilis Kassis**, **Christin Achermann**, **Mihaela Nedelcu**, and **Lorenzo Piccoli** as well as **Raquel Delgado Moreira**, **Gina Fiore Walder**, **Annique Lombard**, **Andreas Perret** and **Ellen Weigand**, together with the presenting NCCR participants.

*Excused:* **Nicole Wichmann**, Administrative Director of Network Office.

*University of Neuchâtel:* **Kilian Stoffel**, Rector; **Felix Kessler**, Vice-rector.

## **2. Main purposes of the site visit 2019**

The Review Panel focused its review on the assessment of the NCCR's scientific development, specifically on the:

- quality of scientific output (paper sessions)
- focus on the migration-mobility nexus
- overall assessment of the scientific progress, the international standing and contributions to the international debate

Last year, the panel recommended organising a site visit to assess the NCCR's progress in the first year of the second phase. For this fifth meeting, the panel suggested an adapted format, focussing on scientific content as outlined in last year's panel report: *"The panel wishes that NCCR researchers will give five presentations that represent the best, most original and scientifically most interesting results from different modules. These presentations will then be thoroughly discussed during a one-day visit. The presentations should be based on recent work and the underlying analysis does not need to be already published or accepted for publication.* (Excerpt 4<sup>th</sup> Panel Report, chapter 9, *Next site visit*).

For this purpose, the NCCR had been asked to select their best publications / papers / manuscripts, submit them in advance, and present them to the panel during the site visit. During these paper presentation sessions, two panel members were assigned to give feedback on the manuscripts and presented work. In order to ensure an encompassing assessment of manuscripts, the panel members who could not attend (Susan Martin and Rupert Brown) submitted written feedback on two of the five papers, and the attending panel experts integrated several points from these assessments in their comments.

In addition, the panel decided last year to discuss the current state and organizational orientation of the NCCR's education and PhD programme. The overall goal of the review was to learn more about innovative aspects in the different modules, as well as about the collaborative work assessing the migration-mobility nexus. At the end of the day, the panel integrated these aspects during an internal discussion and conveyed its appreciation to the NCCR researchers and representatives of the rectorate.

## **3. General impression / baseline**

The review panel would like to thank the NCCR management team, together with the hosting institution, the University of Neuchâtel, and all NCCR participants, for the organisation of the fifth site visit. The panel appreciated the scientific discussions with the researchers on their presented papers.

With the focus on output, the panel intended to assess specific fields in which the NCCR researchers aim to contribute to the international debate. By assessing manuscripts selected based on representation and excellence, the reviewers expected to get a sense of internal (interdisciplinary) collaboration and how teams approach the 'nexus' between migration and mobility. Finally, the panel also intended to assess the overall quality and impact of the presented papers. These intentions are closely linked to the outcome of last year's assessment, especially the panel's concerns about the NCCR's international visibility, scientific impact, and focus on the migration-mobility nexus.

It is the panel's recurrent concern "*that the NCCR becomes more visible beyond Switzerland*", as stated in last year's panel report. The fourth panel report continues by recalling that "*(i)n fact, this was the key aim underlying the panel's first recommendation last year (i.e. the recommendation to define an ambitious dissemination strategy in the full proposal)*" and indicates the obvious 'measure' to assess the NCCR's international standing: "*Of course, international visibility is promoted through visible papers and contributions, (...)*." Hence, the panel proposed a substantive engagement with scientific work.

The NCCR selected five papers for presentation. Some have been published in journals and one in an edited volume. In his introduction and status report, the NCCR Director explained the procedure as well as the main selection criteria: originality, clear methodologies, a comparative dimension, an interdisciplinary scope, and the relevance to the migration-mobility nexus. To illustrate the latter aspect, the NCCR director positioned the five papers on a continuum, from a (classical) migration focus to a mobility focus.

#### **4. Assessment of the presented work**

With regard to the assessment of the presented papers, the panel could not draw consistent and reliable conclusions from the current state of the NCCR research because the presented papers only partially reflected progress and quality, and the presented papers were mainly based on research from phase I. The papers and their presentations, nonetheless, gave an impression of the connection in the specific sub-fields. Moreover, the panel also assessed how the papers addressed the 'nexus'.

Based on the presented papers, the panel could see some illustrations of the positive development already recognised last year. Some publications and teams address interesting aspects related to the migration-mobility linkages or explored new theoretical approaches and innovative ways toward interdisciplinary work in the NCCR network. In terms of content and substance of the presented papers, the panel experts identified strong variations in their quality. Some manuscripts were rated highly and based on sound theoretical and empirical work. Others did not convince with regard to the chosen outlet, the methodological and empirical foundations, or their theoretical underpinnings. The panel, overall, would have wished to see more compelling attempts to contribute to science and international debates.

Another point of interest to the panel was the NCCR's work on the migration-mobility nexus. While the panel agreed that the collaboration between the teams had improved, the feedback of the newcomers in the panel was noteworthy, since they did not find clear evidence that the papers pay adequate attention to this intersection. The majority of the presented work continued to focus on migration aspects, and only a small part was dedicated to mobility. Based on the discussion at this meeting, and as already emphasized in previous meetings, the panel felt that the work on the nexus should be enhanced. The panel felt that a shared and balanced effort is needed for bringing in mobility aspects more prominently, and for better integrating mobility with the dominant migration focus. In the next progress report, the panel would like to see clearer indications on where the modules, groups, or the NCCR have focused on the migration-mobility nexus.

Finally, the panel members were surprised about the selection of some of the presented papers, especially because they knew of other important publications (e.g. in the field of economics) from this NCCR, which were not chosen, but which were considered of a much higher scientific calibre.

The panel members are fully aware of the challenges related to collaborative work and the interdisciplinary scope of the NCCR. Such interdisciplinary settings lead to difficult choices and differences in opinion about the ‘best’ communication channels for the scientific community. The panel recognises this challenges. Nonetheless, the panel agrees that the quality expectations for NCCR publications should not fall below rigorous standards. In fact, in their full proposal and a specific addendum (“Additions to Publication Strategy Phase II”) the NCCR teams already positioned themselves with the aim to promote their international visibility and excellence: “*The researchers of the nccr – on the move are committed to publish in interdisciplinary journals, in particular in Migration, Ethnic or Mobility Studies Journals, as well as in the top journals of their respective disciplines.*” As for the scientific quality, the NCCR stated: “*The high quality and impact of the results are ensured by the fact that researchers of the nccr – on the move publish in top quality journals (...).*” (Citations from “Addendum 3: Additions to Publication Strategy Phase II”).

The panel cannot give substantive advice on the most suitable publication outlets – and the repeated discussions on this topic cause uneasiness for both the panel experts and the NCCR participants. Nonetheless, for this panel, publications in top-tier journals in the specific fields of the NCCR participants are a good measure of achievement, and the reasons for this are threefold. *First*, as cited in the previous paragraph, the NCCR groups actually proposed in their application to aim at publications in the “top journals” of their disciplines. The addendum mentioned above contains a list of both disciplinary and interdisciplinary journals, in which the teams would like to publish. *Second*, the panel experts assume that experienced researchers are aware of, and want to disseminate their scientific work in, recognized scientific outlets. *Third*, when submitting their work to respected journals in their fields, the researchers’ analyses and argumentation will be assessed in by their peers. Hence potential lacunae and weaknesses are likely to be revealed, and authors are given the opportunity to strengthen their work. Accordingly, the panel continues to encourage the NCCR teams to publish their disciplinary and interdisciplinary work in reputable academic journals.

## **5. Management-related areas – state of the education programme**

In the second part of the meeting, the panel assessed the development and state of the NCCR’s education programme. The panel chair emphasized the expected excellence in the promotion of younger scholars and the importance of equal opportunity aspects. Last year, the panel judged the NCCR’s doctoral programme positively. The 4<sup>th</sup> panel report stated: “*The doctoral programme is an important part of the NCCR’s structural long-term impact, its current status is sound and its future promising.*”

The responsible persons from the Education and Equal Opportunities Committee and the management team presented the current state of the PhD programme. In the discussion with the panel, the “measure of success” (including publications of PhDs) were of particular interest. Moreover, the panellists asked about the career steps of the 16 completed PhD. According to an NCCR report, the majority of the PhDs and Postdocs leaving the NCCR (>50%) remain in academia, about 25% move into the public sector, and about 12% are either in the private sector or not classifiable.

The panel praised the positive development of the doctoral programme. It is well-structured, and the reported satisfaction of participants is high. Also the labour market integration of PhD students is unproblematic. The gender distribution in the Phase II cohort is very good. As to the overarching

aspects (interdisciplinarity, internationalisation), the panel underlined that the research days and the International Graduate Conference are adequate formats. Overall, the capacity building and interaction opportunities for the young researchers are excellent. However, the panel was somewhat worried about the emphasis of self-assessed satisfaction levels as the main measure of success. The panel encouraged the team to implement measures outlined in addendum 3 (related to the publication strategy), concerning the encouragement of the NCCR's young scholars.

## **6. Conclusions / recommendations**

The panel appreciated the interactions with the researchers and the efforts made by the whole team, including the representatives of the host university.

What the panel aimed for in this site visit was to have in-depth substantive debates on ideas related to the core scientific objectives of the NCCR. In other words, the NCCR was given the chance to present its most original and innovative work. By discussing these manuscripts, the panel's intention was to assess the development of the NCCR's quality, visibility, and focus on the migration-mobility nexus.

The panel's main message is, overall, that it was not convinced by the potential of the presented work to become a flagship output for the NCCR in terms of innovation or international visibility. In addition, the panel was concerned about the overemphasis on migration-related work, thus neglecting important elements of the central focus of the NCCR – the migration-mobility nexus. There are ongoing reflections about linkages and connections along the migration-mobility nexus, and the panel invited the team to advance on these debates.

The panel encourages the NCCR teams:

- to increase international visibility of the NCCR and to maximise the dissemination and impact of their research, and
- to enhance collaborative research on the migration-mobility nexus in order to significantly advance our understanding of the drivers of human mobility.

## **7. Next site visit**

As already communicated, the next site visit will take place on 18–19 May 2020.

The main objectives of this sixth site visit will be to evaluate the NCCR's scientific output and international standing. The panel will also assess the accomplishments relating to the migration-mobility nexus. Based on this evaluation, the panel will recommend to the Research Council on whether or not the NCCR should be invited to submit a pre-proposal for a third funding phase. Given the significance of the sixth site visit to the future of the NCCR, and given the similarity of criticisms raised against the NCCR repeatedly in the past, the panel strongly recommend sharing these expectations unadulterated with all members of the NCCR.

12/08/2019