

EVALUATION

Amsterdam Sustainability Institute

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

2019-2024

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Preface

Research evaluations using the national Strategy Evaluation Protocol (SEP 2021-2027) are generally intended to support traditional academic units in assessing the quality of their research and societal impact in light of their own aims and strategy. This evaluation was somewhat unique, given the youth and special character of the Amsterdam Sustainability Institute (ASI), an inter-faculty institute created just six years ago to serve as an inclusive umbrella for sustainability-related research across the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU). Research outputs are important to ASI but have not been the priority during its initial years. Instead, the institute has focused on connecting researchers across disciplines and catalyzing new and innovative inter- and trans-disciplinary research addressing critical sustainability challenges. It has also worked to build bridges between VU researchers and society, forging linkages to societal actors and helping to communicate, share, and valorize the university's sustainability research.

The special circumstances of this evaluation required adaptation of the SEP by both the members of the ASI management team and those of us on the assessment committee. Numbers of scientific articles, citations by peers, grants awarded, and research uptake by societal actors do not tell the full story of how effectively ASI has achieved its aims and strategy over its first five years. To properly align our assessment with the goals ASI set for itself, the committee was challenged to look beyond outputs and evaluate the success of the institute in building a new inter-faculty research community, serving as a breeding ground for new research projects and establishing itself as a platform for bridging the science-policy gap. I believe we managed to do this.

ASI enabled the committee's efforts by first preparing a richly informative and meticulously honest self-evaluation. Then, a day before the official site visit, we were invited to experience the work of the institute by participating in its annual symposium. And finally, on the day we were able to find answers to our many questions in candid meetings with the institute's management team, members of its steering committee, and individual VU researchers participating in the institute's research clusters and seed-money projects.

What we experienced and learned in this process enabled us to formulate a well-grounded evaluation of the institute's performance to date and to provide realistic recommendations for the coming years. We hope our findings will be useful to ASI and wish it success in the coming years.

Prof. dr. Michael McClain, chair of the committee



Executive summary

Guided by the mission ‘Integrating knowledge for sustainable societal choices’, the Amsterdam Sustainability Institute (ASI) produces innovative and actionable inter- and transdisciplinary knowledge for the Anthropocene by serving as an inclusive, network-based umbrella for sustainability-related research at VU Amsterdam. ASI spans all VU faculties and has grown into a vibrant community of around 150 researchers of which 60 are officially registered as ASI members in the VU-wide Pure research portal. ASI is managed by a small team reporting to the board of deans and advised by an expert committee. With its bottom-up approach, ASI aims to ensure accessibility, flexibility, and a dynamic research environment.

Key achievements include the creation of seven research clusters that have fostered cross-faculty collaborations. Additionally, Seed funding programs have engaged 152 scientists in 32 interdisciplinary projects, producing scientific articles, educational materials, and decision-making tools. ASI also runs a dynamic events program connecting VU researchers with external stakeholders. Furthermore, ASI has secured over €14 million in external grants, highlighting its growing influence. While the committee acknowledges ASI's achievements, it recommends that ASI take responsibility for evaluating ASI-supported research outputs to more effectively show its impact.

In terms of societal relevance, ASI has successfully bridged academic research with practice, influencing policy discussions and engaging a diverse range of stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, and the private sector. Notable initiatives such as the COOP Centraal project, the contribution to the university fossil-free policy, and the ASK-C project highlight ASI's role in bringing together diverse stakeholders and generating meaningful policy dialogue within and beyond the university. While these collaborations are impactful, the committee recommends prioritizing co-production from the outset of research projects to further strengthen ASI's position as a hub for transdisciplinary sustainability research. Additionally, the committee noted that ASI currently lacks a systematic approach to tracking the citation and use of its research in policymaking. It recommends the development of internal mechanisms to monitor how societal actors engage with its research, which could strengthen ASI's ability to more effectively demonstrate its influence.

ASI was initially funded by the Faculty of Science and the executive board between 2019 and 2021. Since 2022, all participating faculties have contributed, and ASI has also received temporary funding from VU's central research funds. This additional funding, tied to the VU strategy, ends in 2025, which creates uncertainty about ASI's long-term financial stability. The committee recommends that ASI explore new funding sources, including partnerships with commercial enterprises aligned with ASI's sustainability values, and develop a detailed 5-year budget plan that aligns with its strategic goals. Additionally, ASI should explore opportunities to increase its visibility within the VU community to secure continued support.



1. Introduction

1.1 Aim of the evaluation

All publicly funded university research in the Netherlands is evaluated at regular intervals in compliance with a national Strategy Evaluation Protocol (SEP 2021-2027), as agreed by the Universities of the Netherlands (UNL), the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW). The evaluation process, which is applied at the research unit level, consists of an external peer review conducted every six years.

The committee is requested to assess the quality of research and innovation conducted by the Amsterdam Sustainability Institute (ASI) at VU Amsterdam and to provide recommendations for improving both the research quality and ASI's strategic direction. The committee is requested to carry out the assessment based on the guidelines specified in the Strategy Evaluation Protocol (SEP), of which ASI developed an adapted evaluation framework to reflect ASI's unique structure of a network-based organization rather than a traditional research institute.

This report describes the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of this external evaluation of ASI.

1.2 The committee

The Board of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam appointed the following members of the committee:

- Prof. dr. Michael McClain, IHE Delft Institute for Water Education (chair)
- Prof. dr. Tom Pegram, Department of Political Science, University College London
- Dr. Berthe Jansen, Leiden Institute for Area Studies, Leiden University

The Board appointed Drs. Esther Poort of De Onderzoekerij as the committee secretary. All committee members signed a declaration form stating no conflict of interest and ensuring impartiality and confidentiality.

1.3 Procedures followed by the committee

Before the site visit, the committee reviewed the self-assessment report of the institute including appendices.

To align with ASI's network-based structure, rather than a conventional research institute, ASI adapted the SEP evaluation framework. The evaluation is focused on three core areas:

1. Research quality and innovation: The ability to generate new knowledge, develop novel approaches for sustainability research, and address complex real-world challenges through interdisciplinary collaboration.
2. Societal relevance: The extent to which ASI's work addresses societal challenges, contributes to society, and translates research findings into tangible outputs.
3. Viability: ASI's capacity to maintain relevance, effectiveness, and resilience through strategic positioning, financial sustainability, and partnerships.

In addition to these three core areas, the board of VU Amsterdam requested the committee to pay attention to the following questions:



1. Financial sustainability: given ASI's current financial constraints, what innovative funding strategies or opportunities can enhance its resilience and support its long-term goals?
2. Stakeholder engagement: in an increasingly polarized global context, how can ASI effectively engage diverse stakeholders to foster collaboration and amplify its societal impact?
3. Inter- and transdisciplinary excellence: what strategies or practices can ASI adopt to further strengthen and realize its vision of conducting transformative interdisciplinary research?
4. Strategic positioning: how can ASI enhance its visibility and positioning within the academic and broader societal landscapes?

The evaluation was based on documentation provided by ASI, attendance at the symposium organized by ASI on March 6, and interviews conducted during the site visit on March 7 with ASI management, the steering committee, and selected beneficiaries. See Appendix 1 for the symposium program and interview schedule.

The committee discussed its evaluation during its final session on the site visit. The committee chair had a coordinating role in the writing process and delegated the writing of sections to members of the committee. The committee members provided comments on the draft report via email. The draft version was then presented to the ASI for factual corrections and comments. Subsequently, the text was finalized and presented to the Board of the University.



2. Organization and management

Founded in 2019, ASI is a restart of the Amsterdam Global Change Institute (AGCI), which operated from 2010 to 2014. AGCI was discontinued following the departure of its director and a reorganization within the Faculty of Earth and Life Sciences.

ASI is governed by a board representing all participating faculties through their deans. The ASI board, chaired by the dean of the lead Faculty of Science, meets twice a year to discuss progress, set the overall direction, and allocate the budget. Beyond regular oversight by the ASI board, ASI undergoes a biannual evaluation during a management meeting with the board of the Faculty of Science (its lead faculty), to which ASI is organizationally affiliated.

Day-to-day operations are managed by a general director, appointed by the ASI board for a renewable three-year term. The general director is supported by a managing director, a communications coordinator, and a student assistant. Together, they form the ASI management team, which meets regularly, at least twice a month. The management team is further supported by the scientific steering committee, consisting of representatives from all participating faculties and other relevant VU departments, such as the VU Centre for International Collaboration (CIS).



3. EVALUATION

3.1 Mission and strategy

ASI's mission is to produce innovative and actionable inter- and transdisciplinary knowledge for the Anthropocene by serving as an inclusive umbrella for sustainability-related research at VU Amsterdam. ASI explores the interactions between people, socio-economic change, and the global environment in the Anthropocene. Through cutting-edge inter- and transdisciplinary research, it contributes to shaping and informing sustainable societal choices and innovations in the Netherlands, Europe, and beyond.

ASI's strategic goals are:

- To build a strong community of VU researchers across disciplines and faculties.
- To provide a breeding ground for innovative inter- and transdisciplinary research.
- To be a platform for bridging the science-society gap via co-creation.
- To be a platform for communication, sharing, co-creation, valorization, and implementation of sustainability research.

The self-evaluation report outlines the key instruments and programs that ASI has developed:

- The ASI Research Clusters consist of interdisciplinary teams of VU researchers addressing key sustainability issues. They foster collaboration across departments and disciplines to maximize impact and strengthen the VU community. Currently, ASI has seven clusters, each with at least two coordinators from different faculties.
- The ASI Grants Program funds innovative inter- and transdisciplinary projects through the Seed Money initiative and supports grant proposal development via the Innovation Booster initiative.
- The Fellowship of the Anthropocene is a four-month annual residency for a researcher to explore a topic related to the Anthropocene from the perspectives of planet/nature, behavior/society, or ethics/religion.
- The ASI Events Program includes a speaker series and conferences, ranging from large international scientific events to webinars and in-person gatherings for experts and the public. Its flagship(series) event, the SDG Academy, features VU experts and practitioners discussing the latest SDG-related findings through keynotes and panel discussions.
- Expertise Centers highlight VU's research excellence and provide entry points for external stakeholders. Launched in 2023, the Climate Expertise Centre (CEC) unites scientists across disciplines to support regional and national climate initiatives, while also serving as a gateway for external stakeholders into VU's climate research. The Digital Sustainability Center (DiSC), also launched in 2023, promotes collaboration on digitalization, digital transformation, and software's role in sustainability, aiming to create relevant, actionable knowledge through high-quality research and practical solutions. DiSC operates under ASI and includes 12 VU scientists from the Faculty of Science.
- The Innovation Accelerator creates a virtual and physical space for ASI researchers, students, and stakeholders, such as industry and policymakers, to co-create solutions for the Anthropocene's "wicked" problems. It bridges research and impact through collaboration.
- The Communication and Outreach program spans multiple channels, including social media and a podcast.

The committee recognizes that ASI's mission is largely aligned with those of VU and the broader international sustainable development community. Furthermore, the committee finds that ASI's instruments are well aligned with these strategic goals. Its strategy is coherent in addressing initial



challenges, including overcoming faculty silos, securing funding for interdisciplinary projects, and increasing societal engagement.

However, the committee notes a degree of misalignment between ASI's stated mission and its strategic goals. While the mission, "to produce and disseminate Science for Sustainability," emphasizes research output, the four strategic goals—"building," "breeding," "bridging," and "acting as a platform"—primarily focus on catalyzing research. The committee advises clarifying this dual role more explicitly in the Institute's future strategy, including how ASI intends to position itself primarily in terms of research production versus serving as a catalyst for research, or both in the future.

3.2 Research quality and innovation

As a membership-based interfaculty research institute, the quality of ASI's research is grounded in the talents and expertise of its members, who hold primary appointments in different home faculties and the School of Business and Economics. They are a highly productive group of researchers who collectively published more than 500 scientific papers, 93 book chapters, and 57 conference papers during the five-year period considered in this evaluation. ASI, however, claims credit for only the fraction of their research outputs that can be directly traced to the Institute's funding and support. In total, ASI reports 65 scientific publications during the evaluation period, as well as 4 software products and 34 other outputs, including student projects and scientific presentations.

The committee appreciates the careful and honest approach ASI has taken to quantifying its research outputs. While the output figures are modest, the committee understands that the main goals of ASI do not include maximizing the number of research outputs but rather building a strong research community in sustainability science at the VU and catalyzing inter- and transdisciplinary research that addresses critical societal challenges and engages key societal partners. The committee also notes that, since its founding in May 2019, the Institute has been on a growth trajectory, initially focusing on community building and supporting new research collaborations, and more recently increasing engagement with societal partners and working to enhance the visibility of the VU in the national and international sustainability landscape.

ASI research clusters have been the main instrument for community building and have served as breeding grounds for new collaborations. The committee recognizes the results achieved by these clusters, which include regular meetings and lecture series for members to share their research, multiple larger symposia involving external participants, a joint research project, and production of the documentary "What is Nature?".

New research collaborations have been supported by ASI's grants program. Its Seed money grant program was launched in 2019 and has so far connected an impressive 152 scientists in 32 interdisciplinary projects that have produced scientific articles, educational materials and decision-making tools. More recently the research innovation Booster program was launched to catalyze the acquisition of external funding to support innovative interdisciplinary research that aligns with the VU's strengths and strategic agendas. Five innovation Boosters have been supported to date, resulting in extended networks of researchers, MSc research, testing of prototype technologies and a digital-first organizing logic to support platforms facilitating collaboration in renewable energy communities.

In addition to the research clusters and grants program, the committee would like to recognize the success of the Institute's events program in engaging and stimulating the research community within the VU and beyond. Its expertise centers and the various channels of its communication and outreach program have also been very effective in representing and highlighting the important research of the VU.



Evidence for the quality of ASI's research outputs, at least the recognition of its quality, is demonstrated by the more than €14 million acquired in external grants that can be linked to the Institute's support. This funding has come mainly from the European Commission and NWO, both of which have high standards for the excellence of research they support. Further evidence of recognition by peer institutions is found in the actions of other academic institutions in the Netherlands, France and Belgium to create new sustainability institutes modelled after ASI.

Beyond these examples, however, ASI has done little to systematically collect and analyze information about the quality of the Institute's research. The committee recommends that ASI identify relevant indicators of the quality of its research outputs and begin monitoring them using guidance in Appendices E1 and E2 of the Strategy Evaluation Protocol. What is especially missing is evidence of use of research outputs by peers. This can be tracked using indicators such as the number of citations of scientific publications and the number of downloads of software products. The committee is aware that the lack of tracking and analysis of indicators such as these by ASI is intentional, with the justification that such analyses are made in the home units of its members. It is the committee's opinion, however, that when ASI takes credit for research outputs, it should also take responsibility for evaluating their quality. The results will be of value to the Institute in evaluating and improving its programs as well as demonstrating its quality to the VU.

3.3 Societal relevance

ASI has made substantial progress in enhancing the societal impact of sustainability research at the VU. Through its strong network of academic and non-academic partners, ASI has positioned itself as a key platform for bridging research and practice, contributing to policy discussions, and increasing the visibility of sustainability research. Its initiatives in policy engagement, stakeholder collaboration, and public outreach reflect a clear commitment to ensuring that sustainability science translates into real-world impact. The committee's site visit confirmed ASI's catalytic role, particularly in fostering interdisciplinary collaborations that are unlikely to have emerged organically within existing faculty structures.

Moving forward, ASI is well positioned to further strengthen its co-creation processes with external partners, deepen its engagement in policy implementation, and enhance the visibility and adoption of its research outputs in business and public discourse.

ASI has successfully built a strong and diverse network of external partners, including local and national governments, NGOs, and private sector actors. Initiatives such as COOP Centraal, which fosters engagement between young professionals and energy cooperatives, and the ASK-C project, which supports Amsterdam's net-zero climate ambitions, demonstrate ASI's ability to align research with societal needs.

The committee particularly noted ASI's success in convening stakeholders across different disciplines and sectors, evidenced by its coordination of the GROW project, a collaboration to train 51 PhD students from Sub-Saharan Africa.

The Sapiens platform, developed in collaboration with Naturalis and InHolland, has further enriched ASI's role as a convenor of cross-sectoral dialogues on sustainability. However, the long-term outcomes of these initiatives are not always clear, and it remains uncertain how these spaces translate into sustained, impactful collaborations. The committee suggests using Sapiens as a case study to assess how dialogue platforms move beyond prototyping to create structured, ongoing collaborations.



While these collaborations are impactful, there is scope for ASI to embed external partnerships even more systematically into the early stages of research projects. The VU Living Lab serves as an excellent model for stakeholder-driven research, yet at present, only a limited proportion of ASI's Seed money projects are initiated in close collaboration with external actors. The committee observed that while ASI has strong connections with policymakers and NGOs, collaboration with businesses and industry actors could be further expanded, particularly in the co-design of research initiatives. Expanding opportunities for co-production from the outset, rather than primarily engaging stakeholders at later stages, would further strengthen ASI's position as a hub for transdisciplinary sustainability research.

ASI has established a meaningful presence in sustainability policy discussions, contributing expert insights to the Dutch Parliament's Dienst Analyse en Onderzoek and playing a significant role in the 2023 Natuurbrandsignaal Report on wildfire risks.

The Climate Expertise Centre, launched in 2024, alongside the Digital Sustainability Centre, provides a dedicated space for translating research into policy-relevant knowledge, and its recognition in the Netherlands' 8th SDG Report (2024) highlights ASI's growing influence.

A particularly noteworthy achievement has been ASI's contribution to the VU's fossil-free research policy, where it facilitated expert discussions that led to the university's decision to cease collaborations with fossil fuel companies misaligned with the Paris Agreement, for which it received the Green Gown Award 2024. The SustainaBul ranking, where the VU consistently ranks among the top four Dutch universities for sustainability, further demonstrates the institute's impact on the national sustainability research landscape.

The committee highlights these as strong examples of ASI's ability to bring together diverse stakeholders and generate meaningful policy dialogue within and beyond the university.

Given this strong foundation, ASI is well positioned to deepen its engagement in policy implementation. While its research has informed policy debates, clearer documentation of direct outcomes – such as specific regulatory changes or strategic shifts in government or corporate sustainability policies – could provide additional evidence of its long-term influence. The committee noted that ASI currently does not systematically track how its research is cited or used in policymaking and suggests that developing internal mechanisms for monitoring research uptake by societal actors could enhance ASI's ability to demonstrate its influence more concretely.

ASI has played an important role in amplifying sustainability research beyond academia. The launch of the Climate Expertise Centre and the Digital Sustainability Centre will help consolidate expertise and serve as visible entry points for external stakeholders. Public-facing initiatives such as the Climate Breakdown podcast, with 2,500 plays, and the VU ARTSCIENCE gallery exhibition illustrate ASI's commitment to engaging broader audiences with sustainability issues.

ASI has made strong progress in external communications, with a high-quality website and growing public engagement initiatives. However, a more strategic approach to media engagement could help increase ASI's visibility among policymakers, civil servants, and the general public. ASI's plan to continue with its annual symposium and elevate it to become a flagship event is supported by the committee.

3.4 Viability

As described in the self-evaluation report, ASI was funded by the Faculty of Science and the Executive Board between 2019 and 2021. Since 2022, all participating faculties have contributed, resulting in approximately €106K annually. Additionally, ASI receives temporary funding from the VU's central research funds, totaling €164K in 2022 and 2024, and €144K in 2023. The current VU strategy to which



this funding is linked, ends in 2025. This creates uncertainty about ASI's structural funding beyond that point. On average, ASI has received around €200k per year in direct funding, with over €750k of the total €1.1 million invested in research, networking, and outreach.

In discussions with ASI members, the committee observed that, given the many interfaculty connections and collaborations already in place, ASI – as a bare-bones platform – would, in theory, not require substantial increases in funding. However, this is explicitly not the committee's recommendation, though it does view this as a positive consideration.

One of ASI's ongoing challenges is that to be perceived as a viable initiative, it must be highly visible to the university board, colleagues, students, and external stakeholders. In this regard, visibility is essential for viability. It appears that both the MT and affiliate members are making considerable efforts to enhance ASI's profile.

ASI has successfully secured a substantial amount of external research funding (€14.1 million) in addition to other resources through various partnerships. However, questions remain as to whether ASI will be able to secure comparable levels of funding in the future, as this will depend on factors beyond ASI's direct control.

Moreover, it is unclear to what extent this level of funding is essential for ASI to sustain its current levels of impact and effectiveness. While the institute's self-evaluation report provides limited insight into its financial standing, the committee has gathered from interviews what constitutes the minimum required for ASI's operations, as well as the level of funding needed to support its further growth. ASI members have expressed a desire to establish a convergence space to strengthen the institute's physical presence within the university. The committee concurs that a more stable and predictable cash flow would be necessary to realize this ambition.

The committee would like to note that providing additional financial details in the self-evaluation report would have facilitated a more thorough evaluation of ASI's long-term sustainability. While the overall budget appears lean, the committee would have appreciated a more detailed financial breakdown, particularly regarding the allocation of Seed and Booster funds. Additionally, a projected budget for 2025 and even beyond would provide greater clarity for future planning and the committee therefore recommends that the ASI MT develop a prospected budget that is in alignment with ASI's prospected plans – ideally within the framework of a five-year plan.

One issue the MT may wish to address is a structural challenge that could inhibit interfaculty cooperation – namely, the perception among some ASI members that sharing funds across faculties is problematic. The committee advises that cross-faculty funding and spending processes be made more transparent to address and resolve these concerns.

More broadly, and perhaps reflective of current conditions in the sector, ASI's unstable financial situation represents a significant vulnerability, as it threatens the sustainability of its core activities. The committee wishes to emphasize, however, that the output achieved with the current budget shows a highly effective use of funds. Increased financial support – ideally from sources not solely dependent on external grants – would likely enable even greater impact.

In addition, the committee encourages ASI to explore partnerships beyond the university and traditional funding agencies, including potential collaborations with commercial enterprises. ASI has the potential to become a highly attractive institute that certain companies may wish to engage with and support, for instance, by helping to sponsor the proposed convergence space.



3.5 Specific questions

In addition to the criteria specified in the Strategy Evaluation Protocol, ASI requested the committee to pay attention to the following additional questions as well as to offer its assessment and recommendations. Naturally, the issues reflected in these questions featured prominently in the self-evaluation prepared by ASI as well as the discussions held during the site visit. They have therefore been largely answered in the preceding sections. Here is a summary.

1. Financial sustainability: given ASI's current financial constraints, what innovative funding strategies or opportunities can enhance its resilience and support its long-term goals?

While this question seeks advice on innovative funding strategies or opportunities, the committee would first like to re-emphasize the priority of shoring up internal funding from the participating faculties and other sources within the VU. For this to occur, it is essential that ASI be explicitly recognized in the implementation plan for the university's 2026-2030 strategy. ASI should be recognized by the participating faculties as an essential instrument through which they can demonstrate their commitment to, and progress toward, implementing the strategy.

Turning to external sources of funding, the committee supports and encourages ASI's efforts to forge new collaborations with commercial enterprises and philanthropic organizations. The plan to develop one or more new convergence spaces is especially well-suited to exploring new financial arrangements, such as a naming sponsorship agreement that covers the expenses of coordination and activities associated with the convergence space.

Another less innovative but justifiable source of funding is the external research grants acquired with the support of ASI. The committee understands from its discussions with the ASI MT that it is not possible for the Institute to receive indirect costs from acquired projects. Considering this, the committee suggests exploring the possibility of project coordinators directly engaging ASI in the projects, in roles where the Institute excels such as convening events, engagement and coordination with stakeholders, and external communications.

2. Stakeholder engagement: in an increasingly polarized global context, how can ASI effectively engage diverse stakeholders to foster collaboration and amplify its societal impact?

Although this question was not specifically discussed during the site visit, it suggests an interest of ASI to engage stakeholders who disagree with the core principles of the Institute. These may be stakeholders with opposing views in the polarized global context. This is an admirable goal and strongly supported by the committee, but engagement that involves potential conflict requires particular skills that may not currently exist within ASI. In this area, ASI may benefit from internal VU partners such as the Athena Institute or external partners more specialized in facilitating collaboration in situations of conflict. Though challenging, this may be a good theme for a convergence space focused on highly polarizing topics.

3. Inter- and transdisciplinary excellence: what strategies or practices can ASI adopt to further strengthen and realize its vision of conducting transformative interdisciplinary research?

In the view of the committee, ASI has clearly distinguished itself as excellent in interdisciplinary research, but there is room for improvement in transdisciplinary research. The main advice of the committee is to more deeply engage stakeholders in the co-design and co-development of the Institute's research efforts. This requires greater involvement of stakeholders in activities funded with Seed money. The explanation of why stakeholder involvement in Seed money activities has been limited to date is that Seed money was not meant for external partners. However, the



committee questions whether it is necessary that funds be transferred to external partners. The committee urges ASI to explore all means possible to engage transdisciplinary partners earlier in the process.

4. Strategic positioning: how can ASI enhance its visibility and positioning within the academic and broader societal landscapes?

ASI has made notable progress in enhancing its visibility. However, arguably, ASI's strategic positioning remains relatively modest. Its branding strategy focuses on developing expert centres, producing accessible content, and hosting international fellows. While these initiatives certainly help raise ASI's profile, they do not differentiate it from other sustainability institutes in a competitive research landscape.

The committee advises ASI to craft a compelling narrative around its mission, vision, and unique contributions to sustainability research and societal engagement. This narrative should showcase ASI's identity as a dynamic, network-based institute that catalyzes inter- and transdisciplinary research collaboration across the university and beyond. It should be consistently integrated across all communication channels, reinforcing ASI's distinctive role and impact.

In addition to the development of a compelling narrative, ASI could also work to increase the visibility of its "brand". The ASI webpage, for example, looks like all other VU webpages; to create a more distinct look, with a logo, may increase visibility. The staff directly involved with ASI's daily management should also be more visible on the site. A media-spokesperson should be easily findable on the site and they should be also registered with organizations such as ANP (Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau). As mentioned earlier, an actual physical space for ASI would further cement its presence within VU.

3.6 Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, ASI has made remarkable progress in advancing interdisciplinary sustainability research at VU Amsterdam. While its direct research output remains modest, ASI has effectively established a thriving interfaculty research community. Its role as a catalyst for collaboration, in external funding acquisition, and societal engagement is clear. Through its dedication to advocating for policy change, stakeholder partnerships, and public outreach, ASI ensures that sustainability science has a tangible, real-world impact. Despite making efficient use of its limited resources, securing long-term funding remains a challenge.

The committee has identified several recommendations that it believes will enable ASI to build on its successes and further strengthen its position. The main recommendations are:

- Take responsibility for evaluating the quality of ASI's research output by identifying and monitoring relevant indicators, as well as developing case-based narratives.
- Enhance co-creation processes with external partners from the outset of research projects.
- Develop internal mechanisms to monitor how societal actors engage with its research, thereby enhancing its ability to demonstrate its impact.
- Increase financial support by seeking partnerships beyond traditional funding sources, including commercial enterprises, to ensure financial sustainability and support growth.
- Adopt a more targeted approach to media engagement to increase ASI's visibility among policymakers, civil servants, and the public.



- Develop a prospected budget that is in alignment with ASI's prospected plans – ideally within the framework of a five-year plan.



Appendix A - Program of the site visit

March 6, 2025	Symposium
12:00 -13.00	Lunch committee
13.30 - 14.00	MatchMaking- round 1
14.00 - 14.10	Welcome
14.10 - 14.50	Opening speeches - Sjoukje van Oosterhout (Milieudefensie) - Eva Wolf (Tilburg University)
14.50 - 15.00	Break
15.00 - 16.00	Workshops
16.05 - 16.50	Roundtable discussions
16.50 - 17.00	Closing
17.00 - 18.00	Borrel with round 2 of MatchMaking

March 7, 2025	Interviews
9.30 - 10.15	Preparation committee
10.15 - 10.30	Break
10.30 - 11.30	Interview MT ASI
11.30 - 11.45	Break
11.45 - 12.45	Interview steering committee
12.45 - 13.30	Lunch
13.30 - 14.30	Interview Seed money and Clusters (beneficiaries of ASI)
14:30 – 14.45	Preparation of second management interview
14:45 – 15.15	Second management interview
15.15 -16.15	Committee meeting (preparation report and preliminary findings)
16.15	Presentation preliminary findings



Appendix B - Budget

ASI Budget 2019-2024¹

	2018	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
<i>Funding</i>							
Direct funding	75	150	150	268	254	274	1171
Contract research							2
Total funding	75	150	150	268	254	274	1173
<i>Expenditure</i>							
Personal costs	55	58	60	60	70	105	408
Material costs	20	92	92	208	184	169	765
Total costs	75	150	150	268	254	274	1173

¹The budgets of ASI and the profile theme Science for Sustainability have been integrated to ensure bigger impact

