



Evaluation Report Scientific Committee Netspar

Preliminary remarks

The report was prepared by the chair of Netspar's Scientific Council, Monika Bütler, after consultation with the other members of the Council. The feedbacks were collected in October 2017, mainly by email (plus some personal communications).

The report offers insights on a number of important aspects of Netspar's work. All members of the SC consider the activities of Netspar as extremely worthwhile. To cite one member:

"It has long been clear to me that the creation of Netspar in the Netherland has been a genial move that, in perfect complement with a unique Dutch pension industry, makes this country a worldwide leader in this domain. Netspar has been able to attract and to mobilize the best Dutch researchers in their domain to think about and to work to improve existing pension systems. Compared to other European countries where pension research is basically non-existent, The Netherland is now a bright spot for top pension experts around the world."

Nonetheless, the members of the SC also mention some critical points and areas of improvement. As a Council we hope that our suggestions are useful and contribute to the success of Netspar also in the future.

Visibility from an academic angle in comparison to other initiatives (CEPAR, the Pension Research Council at the Wharton School, MEA, Percent and Cintia)

All members consider Netspar to be at least as visible as other comparable organizations, with the possible exception of the PRC in the US, an MEA in terms of data. A majority thinks that Netspar has a greater impact on research in pensions and retirement than these other organizations. What seems to stand out is that Netspar is now a more international Organization than many of its peers, especially in bringing international scholars – both junior and senior to its events. For junior researchers financial support and the opportunity to meet at international conferences is extremely valuable.

It needs to be mentioned, that the active partnerships with CEPAR, PRC, and Cintia are valuable both for Netspar and for those organizations. One potential area of future collaboration that was mentioned was data collection and/or repositories (with MEA/Share, there seem to be issues with the financing the Share data collection in the Netherlands).

International Pension Workshop

The Scientific Council considers the IPW as one of the most successful initiatives of Netspar. Getting international visitors to attend and to present their work at these conferences seems to be one of the secrets of Netspar's success.

The standard of papers of is mostly high, and the discussants – often high profile international researchers - take their role seriously. The members like the excellent selection of papers from both Dutch and European (and increasingly non-European) authors. Of the global experts on pension systems, a large number are based in the Netherlands – most likely also as a consequence of Netspar, so it is a particularly good forum for researchers who come from international locations to receive feedback from those experts. The inclusion of a plenary lectures from a high-profile internationally recognized academics is considered very valuable.

The scientific council agrees that Netspar should continue to provide resources and think about incentives to keep getting a strong contingent of international researchers. One idea mentioned was a best paper prize awarded, where the winner would also meet with some professionals from Dutch pension funds for a small lunch to discuss research.

While most members agreed that the length (2.5 days) and the location (Leiden, Amsterdam) of the conference were good, there was some disagreement about the optimal timing of the event. January might be difficult for some US scholars

International Network for Pensions, Aging, and Retirement Research (INPARR) and annual conference with the OECD

Most Scientific Council members welcome the initiative to bring together three key international centres of ageing/retirement/pensions research (Netspar, PRC, CEPAR) and strongly recommend to continue the project. Research has academic and policy/practice stakeholders, and so it is important to get researchers from the three organisations together for information sharing and to build collaborations. Apart from presenting cutting edge research by international researchers, such an initiative also gets the research in front of policy-makers.

There is less agreement on OECD as a collaborator and venue. While OECD does interesting and important studies, it is also seen as a politically active organization with its own political agenda. I might consider alternating OECD-Paris with another organization every other year, just to keep up excitement (EIOPA in Frankfurt? IMF?)

Theme proposals for large scale funding for three year projects - Do these proposals adequately reflect the most relevant areas of research? Any comments on the quality of the proposals or the selection process?

The Scientific Council appreciates the efficiency of the process and its user friendliness for the reviewers. The proposals are carefully evaluated by a panel of experts (from both inside and outside the SC). Inadequate proposals are eliminated from consideration if the score is too low, preventing a waste of resources.

There was no consensus as to the quality and contents of the proposals. Some members mention the great pipeline of research proposals which cover a wide

range of topics. The proposals are seen to make both a practical and a scientific contribution. However, one member has seen the quality of the proposals declining over the last two years. Another member considers many proposals too applied, without any theoretical underpinning, and with too narrow a focus.

What seems to be an issue is that there is no full coverage of the various areas of research in the pension field. Moreover, most applications are Dutch and the Netherlands have a clear focus on economic research. Other disciplines such as sociology, politics, law or psychology are less represented. The question however rises whether this is due to Netspar or the Dutch research field. The areas of research could be made more relevant by asking a panel of industry experts what topics they would like to see investigated. One member also mentioned that there should be more focus on studies that work with administrative and other data.

One of the more critical aspects of the proposals was the handling of proposals outside economics/finance and, more generally, of multidisciplinary proposals. One reviewer commented that non-economic proposals did not always take into account sufficiently the expertise of the most related reviewer. The idea was put forward that the selection process might give more weight to those reviewers whose disciplinary competence is closest to the proposal under review.

Interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary research

Netspar has started to put a lot more emphasis on inter- und multi-disciplinary research. Interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary research is seen to be of high relevance when dealing with topics connected to population ageing, but unfortunately does not get enough recognition in academia. One of the problems is that each discipline (economics, sociology, epidemiology, finance, actuarial science) has its own methods, standards and reporting styles. One idea put forward is that Netspar would benefit from closer connections with research groups that have developed an expertise in this area (such as those involved in running HRS, ELSA and SHARE).

While most members of the SC welcome the move to other disciplines, there are also critical voices. One member thinks that the projects funded by Netspar should be primarily in economics and finance, but with a clear priority to attract more proposals in behavioral economics and behavioral finance, as these disciplines are critical for pension plan design. One problem with some of the past proposals outside economics is that they have not always been of high quality. Most members agree that the active acquisition of such proposals should nonetheless continue. Apart from the “usual suspects” - psychology, sociology, public health, law – more emphasis should be put on technology. There are tremendous opportunities to connect with computer scientists who are interested in running field experiments.

Publications in top and very good journals

Apparently, the number of top publications in economics has dropped over the years. Members of the Scientific Council offer different insights and interpretations of this development.

Publication data are obviously hard to interpret. While not all members see a clear decline (due to measurement, publication lags etc), most agree that a drop in top publications would be a concern for the academic reputation of Netspar which needs to be addressed. One potential reason given by one member, may have to do with an overly applied character of many projects and with their lack of an internationally comparative dimension. Another reason is that Netspar is moving away from a focus on Economics. As a consequence the benchmark should be expanded from just Economics journals. Other journals from finance/management/marketing could be included as top rank, as well as journals from other disciplines - Psychology, Medicine, Law.

Within economics, it will be crucial to get international researchers working in economics and finance, both traditional and behavioral branches

New vision for the next four years, emphasizing the impact of decisions earlier in the life cycle for pension and retirement outcomes, as well as the new opportunities of “big data” to tailor pension contracts to the needs and preferences of individuals.

Most members of the SC agree that these two topical areas are important and promising. Valuable childhood and adolescence information is available in existing surveys (including the third and seventh waves of SHARE, another reason for a closer collaboration). It is harder to get information about the earliest years (in utero and pre-school years), that are potentially very important. Another important area of future research would be the relationship between pensions and housing wealth. (Note by a sociologist: “life cycle” is not used much outside economics; the corresponding concepts are “life course” in sociology, demography and public health, “life history” in biology and related fields, and “life span” in psychology.)

Journal editors seem to be interested in more at the computer science/economics intersection. Some members mention that "big data" in Netspar related fields might rather be studies that use administrative data which allow us to learn how individuals really respond to work, savings, and investment incentives inherent in pension systems. Big data tend to have lots of observations on very few variables. They become truly interesting for academic research if they can be linked to other data sources (including surveys).

On a more cautionary note, new European data protection legislation is making potentially fruitful links between surveys and administrative data ever more difficult. This poses a threat to academic research with big data.

Ideas and comments from the council

To conclude, the members of the Scientific Council see Netspar as a great initiative that should whole-heartedly be supported also in the future. Outside ob-

servers are especially impressed about the close cooperation between the various actors in the field. Netspar has proven to be very valuable in many areas in the past and is likely to do so also in the future. NETSPAR triggers research that would potentially not happen otherwise in an important domain that affects the lives of millions.

Nonetheless, there are also suggestions for future work: Ideally there should be more internationally comparative work, more from other disciplines, and more project calls to researchers from outside the Netherlands. The collaboration with SHARE is seen to be crucial for the future due to a lack of public funding for the collection of longitudinal and multidisciplinary data on the 50+ in the Netherlands.

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