Research Project Resilience and Humanism
University of Humanistics

1. Project Title

Resilience and Humanism (GW&H)
An interdisciplinary humanistic research project

2. Project manager

Prof. dr. Joachim Duyndam

3. Period of Duration

From 1 January 2010 to 1 January 2013, with the prospect of a prolongation.

4. Preamble: Short Introduction

The research project Resilience and Humanism (GW&H) is aimed at resuming and actualizing the project initiated by Jaap van Praag, founding father of contemporary Dutch humanism which he considered to be his ‘major battle’. Departing from the premise that a person’s worldview is an important factor in determining their mental fortitude, he was keen to develop and promote a type of humanism that would make people mentally resilient. His witnessing the rise and excesses of fascism in the 1930s and 40s profoundly influenced this ambition. In Van Praag’s view the guidance and inspiration that humanism, as a deliberately followed worldview, provides, can make people resilient to the forces and the enticements of mass movements coercing people to toe the party line.

Resilience is urgent today too, however it should be placed in a quite different context than in Van Praag’s era. He was able to develop a humanistic worldview against a backcloth of an orderly, pillarized, post-war Netherlands which fitted into place neatly alongside established churches and societies, whereas today we live in a world of increasing globalization, migration, multiculturalism, global North-South inequality, as well as having a more individualistic view of the world – to mention but a few contemporary complications. Nevertheless the similarities still abound. In our age too, people are exposed to the pressures of a motley company of mass phenomena: from consumerism, cultural dumbing down, the stress to achieve, normative social pressure, lifestyle-demands and standardization of opinions to media hypes, Islam phobia and general xenophobia.
Resilience is required if one is not to become the plaything of such movements and developments. This mental fortitude is imperative because these movements and developments are threatening vital human values like, freedom, responsibility, solidarity and even human dignity.

In this research project the relation between humanism and resilience will be considered from a contemporary context. The aim is to further develop dialogical humanism; the expectation being that this can boost the type of resilience required today. This form of humanism is directed towards an open dialogue with other world-views – as opposed to a closed monologue. It is dedicated to a joint quest rather than to firmly stated solutions, and as such demands finiteness, insecurity and differences be treated wisely. As a dialogical worldview humanism can be seen as a critically examining and rejuvenating cultural movement – as having a tradition of its own, but not upheld to the exclusion of others. As a worldview based on an investigative approach and scientific debate, humanism aims to forge explicit ties with ‘humanistic’ rudiments and trends in other religions and traditions and other world views.
The aim of this research project can be summarized as to link up this humanistic openness and dialogue to the promotion of resilience.

5. Composition of the project team

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<th>Faculty</th>
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<tr>
<td>Prof. dr. Hans Alma</td>
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<td>Dr. Christa Anbeek</td>
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<td>Dr. Dieuwertje Bakker</td>
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<td>Prof. dr. Joep Dohmen</td>
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<td>Prof. dr. Joachim Duyndam (project manager)</td>
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<td>Drs. Bert Gasenbeek</td>
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<td>Dr. Ton Jorna</td>
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<td>Dr. Carmen Schuhmann</td>
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<td>Prof. dr. Adri Smaling</td>
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<th>Ph.D. students</th>
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<tr>
<td>Drs. Saskia van Goelst Meijer (AiO)</td>
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<td>Drs. Wouter Kuijiman (AiO J.P. van Praaginstituut)</td>
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<td>Drs. Vincent Stolk (AiO J.P. van Praaginstituut)</td>
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<td>Drs. Anouk Bolsenbroek (alumna/humanisticus)</td>
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<td>Drs. Jacob Oeverbeek (alumnus/humanisticus; running for Ph.D.)</td>
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<td>Drs. Ger Palmboom (researcher VUMC)</td>
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6. Description of the project

Aim and questions raised in the project

The scientific aim of this research project can be broadly summarized as the linking up of humanism to the promotion of resilience.

The research question associated with this comprehensive aim reads as follows: how can, on the one hand, a model of open, dialogical humanism be developed and embraced, which in its content and function boosts the resilience of individuals and groups in the social-cultural-historical context of the 21st century; and how, on the other hand, should resilience be interpreted so that it can provide a plausible response in terms of giving meaning and humanization – that is to say in humanist terms: how should it be deployed to ensure a meaningful and dignified existence – bearing in mind the positive and negative challenges facing individuals and groups nowadays.

This research question gives rise to a number of sub-questions, which will be studied by the researchers participating in the study either individually or jointly. Collaboration in this research project will be realized in three teams: (1) a group looking at the question from an historical perspective: history of humanism; (2) from an empirical/practice-based perspective, in particular, although not exclusively, in relation to humanist counseling; and (3) from a philosophical perspective, in particular, although not exclusively, in relation to the significance of exemplars and role models.

Execution and valorization

At the moment resilience is not a common idea, and is far from being self-evident. However, this does not mean that the significance and the aspiration expressed in this notion are not relevant to the present day. Quite the contrary, in other guises and under other names, like self-help, emancipation and empowerment, these intentions would appear to be very topical. Where, for instance, empowerment denotes humanizing theories and practices that depart from group or individual power, rather than dwelling on people’s shortcomings or cultural deprivation, and where this power is directed towards the strengthening of people’s own capabilities, so that they are able to have more influence on situations and events that are important to them, in such a context resilience is aimed at a group or individual’s own drive to take responsibility for their own lives. The added value, however, of actualizing resilience, if compared to the mainly humanizing-oriented empowerment goals, lies in its potential to furnish existence with meaning. Apart from its humanizing aim, the power of resilience is that of giving meaning to everyday life. Typical, as well as very diverse empowerment practices, like furnishing micro-credits for small operators in developing countries usually run by women, projects aimed at observed self-effectiveness involving immigrant and migrant youths in the Netherlands, and the support of indigenous groups making a stand against the destruction of their cultural and everyday environment, are given added value in terms of giving meaning to life if viewed from a resilience perspective. Pursuing the examples already given, the initiatives made possible by micro-credits, the observed self-effectiveness, and the durability for the indigenous cultures are pre-eminent examples of the promotion and strengthening of the self-direction of identity and culture – in short: paramount in making sense of the world. Even the classical example of empowerment avant la lettre, the rise of the 19th-century trade union movement, leading to workers demanding the right to an honest wage, good working conditions and reasonable working hours, shows that when the element of meaning is disregarded, an empowerment project can be a material success, but a few generations later can still lead to consumerism.
It is due to this element of meaning and, more broadly speaking, the philosophical impact of the research question, that this research project has chosen as its departure point the somewhat unmanageable concept of resilience. As indicated in the introduction above (point 4), the aim of this project which Van Praag himself called the ‘major battle’ against cultural nihilism – more optimistically formulated as: the battle to boost people’s resilience by providing them with a worldview, a philosophy of life, a humanistic philosophy in particular – is to once again think the principles through and bring them up to date.¹ In so doing this project links up with the humanistic tradition, by taking it to hand, renewing it and taking it a step farther.

Inasmuch as people empowerment, qua humanization, can be seen as a modern-day variant of the battle to boost resilience, the current empowerment debate can be seen as an important indicator for the context in which resilience should be reviewed today. Unlike the twentieth-century emancipatory movements, who in their struggle for recognition and the granting of equal rights for women, homosexuals, blacks and others, made a strong appeal to government and legislation, people empowerment is more directed towards people’s self-emancipation from the inside. That also holds for the resilience that this research project intends to fully consider and bring up to date. Both topics, both empowerment and resilience, depart from the power innate in people and groups, both are keen to be given the authority to direct their own lives, and neither put their faith blindly in a protective and caring government. Both ‘the patriarchal state’, suggesting protection by government through legislation, and ‘the matriarchal state’ suggesting care being taken of its people from cradle to grave, find themselves at present in the process of withdrawal. One of the ways in which this can be seen is the de facto powerlessness of governments when faced with the complexity of interwoven crises – economic crises, climate crises, food crises, commodity crises – which we find ourselves in today; powerless to deal with crises which encroach upon our existence and our future. However, not only governments have proved to be indecisive and have provided little for us to clutch on to, despite all manner of attempts at restitution, neither supra-individual executive bodies nor established authority encompassing notions like tradition (including role patterns), religion, social class, nationality, ethnicity, (and in the Netherlands pillarized social groups), can any longer provide the protection and care that they once did. Sociologists identify our current situation as a ‘risk society’ (Beck), a ‘public frustration society’ (Boutellier), a ‘complexity system’ (Cilliers, Hofmeyr) or as a ‘post-traditional order’ (Bauman, Giddens). A common feature in all these diagnoses of the times is the emphasis that has come to lie on the individual. The reflective individual who himself acts as his own guide, determining his own identity, responsible himself for the biography he chooses to live. This is the person who emerges as the cornerstone of current thinking about culture and society.

However it is exactly this self-determinative and self-responsible assumed role that nowadays is exposed to the pressure (mentioned above in the introduction) from consumerism and media hypes to xenophobia. In other words: a person’s autonomy, the ability to organize one’s life according to one’s own standards, is not self-evident but has to be claimed in the face of unremittingly working heteronomy, that is to say, against a backcloth of dominant standardization that is constantly being foisted upon us and which is increasingly threatening to take over the direction of our own lives – sometimes without our even realizing it. Today, the market and the media are the most powerful heteronomies. The media tells us what is good and bad and the market reigns supreme. Its long arm extends not only to the supermarket, the job market, the relationship market and the leisure market, but also to areas like the political viewpoint market and the scientific research subsidy market – determining what is and what is not viable. The paradox of these heteronomies though is that they seek their legitimization in terms of autonomy. After all, shouldn’t the market prevail for being the mechanism ensuring freedom of choice and independence through privatization, from which we may expect a maximum of well-being and the highest quality of life?

Resilience seizes upon this paradox and carries it. Resilience doesn’t only imply the ability to resist or provide protection against influences, pressure and external interference (negative freedom), but also entails being able to create, reserve and validate the room available for the development of one’s talents and for art of living, in order to make sense of life (positive freedom). Both sides embody resilience’s potential to humanize and make sense of life. Resilience is the power one needs to fulfill the demands of negative and positive freedom. Both these implications of freedom are conveyed in the different connotations of resilience: from passive endurance and staying power, through creative survival flexibility and buoyancy, to proactive exis-

¹ Next to this ‘major battle’ Van Praag inspired and performed what he called a ‘minor battle’ to secure equal rights for secular humanists – the latest battle being urgent but, according to Van Praag, on the long term less important than the battle for resilience.
tence and participation.

In the field of force in which resilience makes sense, people are to be found who find themselves ‘functioning normally’ within the confines of their civil rights as well as people who work in a particular field – like in the army or police force. Or, alternately, people who are unemployed, or live in a culturally deprived or marginal position in society, like those living in care homes, in half-way houses, in custody or in an asylum-seekers’ centers. It is no coincidence that people living in these places feel the need for humanist counseling, seeing as this is partly aimed at boosting the clients’ resilience.

The position of humanism as a philosophy of life with respect to resilience has the following relations/connections.

- Humanism does of course combat heteronomies like violations of human rights, restricting people’s freedoms, discrimination, and the like – where the latter occur on a large or small scale. But perhaps even more important: humanism stimulates consciousness-raising when it comes to ‘soft-punch heteronomies’ like the media and the market, which are often not recognized nor experienced as heteronomies because they, according to the above-mentioned paradox, give the impression of being autonomous in terms of providing freedom of choice and independence. You cannot defend yourself against slavery, let alone liberate yourself from it, if you are not even conscious of your own slavish obedience. By making people aware of the above-mentioned paradox humanism can help people to parry these attacks and contribute to people’s resilience.

- The interests of humanism are strongly related to the struggle for human rights. It is no coincidence that freedom, participation and well-being – which can be considered to form the basic moral principles of human rights (Buitenweg 2001) – are also core values of humanism. Of these three principles resilience, in a subjective sense, can of course be directly linked to the freedom mentioned above. If we are talking about resilience in relationships – encouraging resilience in oneself and others in relationships with other people, as in humanist counseling – it would seem that the core value at stake is participation. For humanist counseling is partly oriented towards the promotion of participation in society in a worthy and meaningful way, and at all levels of society, in particular, but not exclusively, for those who through illness, imprisonment, redundancy, exile, or care-dependency are not managing very well or are likely not to be able to manage well in the future. Encouraging participation – by giving the opportunities back to those who are stuck – is an outstanding example of humanist mental counseling. Resilience and participation both depart from the assumption that: in order to participate in society in a useful and dignified way one must be mentally resilient, and inversely participation strengthens resilience.

- Characteristic of humanism is openness to other opinions, other cultures and other people. Openness implies the willingness to consider acquired opinions and views as provisional, the readiness to engage upon self-criticism, and the desire to get into conversation with people who have different, new or unexpected viewpoints, based on the idea that the only way to find and substantiate meaning and truth is through dialogue with others. This is why humanism attaches such great importance to imagination, art, culture, both for the elite and popular culture, scientific research and philosophy. In contrast to tight-lipped conclusiveness like being convinced of being in the right, having set answers, and the authority of tradition and power, the openness of humanism is exactly the quality that furnishes resilience to individuals and groups. Instead of being driven by fear of otherness, whether the other is old or new, humanism is driven by critical curiosity and the desire for knowledge. It is these aspects of humanism in particular that make people mentally resilient. This philosophical openness goes back to a humanist hypothesis that people have the ability to renew their lives.

- Closely tied in with openness is the dialogical character of humanism. In its capacity to be a critical and rejuvenating movement in culture (as it has been since Erasmus’s time), and also in its capacity as being a philosophy of life (which it has been since the eighteenth-century), humanism lives on dialogue. In the multicultural multi-religious and multi-philosophical society of today, humanism manifests itself as a dialogue aiming at an encounter between worldviews. It would be difficult to over-exaggerate the social importance of this dialogue in the world today with its increasing emphasis on philosophical and thereby related political differences of opinion – a world of increasing nationalism and inwardness. Dialogical humanism initializes, feeds and maintains this encountering, and studies its epistemological, methodological and practical conditions.
• Apart from openness and dialogue as basic characteristics, the intrinsic and functional identity of humanism (Smaling 2009) can be looked at in more detail using a concept of humanity, a worldview, an outlook on history and the future, specific moral and aesthetic principles and similar features. It is possible to distinguish a common core for these intrinsic and functional elements, a number of supportive and humanistic values; these include freedom, equality, participation, human dignity, sustainability, tolerance, respect and appreciation of diversity. These values, if you will, horizontally transcendent values, which have been passed down to us, do not however come on their own, but are always concrete and context-bound embodied in people, actions, human lives and stories about them. In their concrete and context-bound embodiment these values must be repeatedly re-interpreted or 'applied', mostly in and departing from new contexts. This hermeneutical presentation, in contrast to one enforced by authority, is characteristic of humanism, and shows the hermeneutical character of resilience. Due to its relational-hermeneutical character resilience plays a crucial role in the process of human-identity development. An important role in hermeneutical value transference is played by role models for moral actions. Good and inspiring role models contribute pre-eminent to the resilience of people and groups. For instance in the Netherlands the resilience of women was spurred on by the inspiration provided by role models like Aletta Jacobs and Joke Smit.

• Humanism gains its identity partly through (1) research into the history of humanism, which leads to, among other things, a critical and effective self-comprehension of humanism and of humanists; and through (2) research of the so-called humanism critique. Since Friedrich Nietzsche in the 19th century gave the initial impulse, major 20th-century thinkers like Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault have aimed fundamental criticism at humanism, in particular the humanist practice of putting man into a central position. A reliable humanistic worldview implies taking this criticism to heart and searching for a future-oriented position with respect to this and similar criticism using his knowledge of his own history and tradition and self-knowledge. One of the traditions alluded to here is Darwinism and evolutionary thinking which, unlike classic humanism, sees a continuity between humans and animals. The above-mentioned human capacity of self-renewal can also be interpreted as evolutionary.

**Scientific methods**

These last references to Darwinism and evolutionary thought make it clear that the execution of this research project cannot be confined to traditional methods of the humanities. An express effort will be made to join up with life sciences, including on the one hand evolutionary and behavioral biology (De Waal, Blaffer Hrdy) and on the other hand brain research such as in the field of mirror neurons (Gallese, Iacoboni). Some of the elements we shall try to focus in the sub-questions like imagination and the significance of model figures we shall try to connect up with life-science viewpoints with traditional behavioral and social scientific approaches like philosophy, ethics, historical science, religious studies, psychology, and methodology. Within the UvH there are no facilities to carry out experimental, empirical life-science research, but due to the availability of relevant information that can be provided by the researchers, it will be possible under methodological supervision to make good use of results of suchlike research carried out by others.

**Research project’s sub-questions**

As indicated above in the project’s aims and presentation of the research question, a number of connected sub-questions will arise from the main research question, which will be individually and jointly studied by the participating researchers. These sub-questions will not be mentioned separately in this brief description of the project. The contributions of the participating researchers is to be clustered in three teams

1. A group looking from an historical perspective: the history of humanism;
2. A group looking from an empirical/practice-based perspective, in particular (but not exclusively) with respect to humanist counseling; and
3. A group looking from a philosophical perspective, in particular (but not exclusively) with respect to the significance of exemplars and role models.
• **History of humanism team**

The creation, development, the context, and significance of institutionalized humanism in the Netherlands have not been adequately researched up to the present moment. Common to the research sub-questions in the cluster *History of humanism* is the issue of the cohesion between the institutional development of modern Dutch humanism with contemporary social, political, cultural, and philosophical changes in Dutch society. The concrete goal is threefold. In the first place the research in this cluster is oriented towards gaining more insight into the internal organizational developments in the humanist movement. In the second place the research is aimed at gaining insight into the responses of the humanist movement to contemporary social and societal developments. In the third place the research is aimed at gaining insight into which aspects of humanist organizations have had an influence on other movements, organizations and developments in the Netherlands. The characteristics of organized humanism are its attempt to humanize society by its fostering of the leading of a purposeful life for individuals within that society. The effort put into achieving this goal, and the consequences of it for society, are therefore a point of special interest throughout the entire programme. In view of the limited historiography it will also be necessary to carry out substantial source study (including oral video history) into the internal culture of humanistic organizations if the research questions are to be dealt with properly.

(Bert Gasenbeek, Vincent Stolk, Wouter Kuijiman, Elise van Alphen (pm))

• **Team dealing with mental counseling and other humanistic practices**

Due to a variety of causes, including a lack of research funds in this field, there is a considerable paucity of research in the field of humanist counseling. The sub-questions dealt with by this team are an attempt to remedy the situation, but they are not the sole source. In as far as promoting resilience in a humanistic way is a central aim of humanist counseling, the entire research project at hand can be considered as directly or indirectly contributing to mental counseling. This team’s sub-questions include:

- How can human imagination contribute to the open, dialogical outlook on life which humanism aims to achieve, and how can imagination be deployed methodically in mental counseling based on humanism?
- What can resilience in different practical situations signify and what can the specific contribution made by humanist counselors do to strengthen this effect? What methodology and ‘tools’ can be put to use, and what role do worldviews/humanism play in this?
- What is the role of ideology and processes aimed at providing life with meaning in indigenous development, oriented towards the fostering of well-being in foreign aid?

(Hans Alma, Christa Anbeek, Dieuwertje Bakker, Anouk Bolsenbroek, Saskia van Goelst Meijer, Ton Jorna, Jan Hein Mooren, Ger Palmboom, Carmen Schuhmann, Adri Smaling and Anneke Sools)

• **Team involved with the significance of role models and art of living**

In this cluster the definition of the problem in the research project will concentrate on the significance of role models in humanism in relation to resilience. Just as in any other philosophy of life, in the humanist tradition role models have a part to play. Role models are concrete epitomizations of important and consequently exemplary values – in humanism these are humanistic values. These icons may be living or historical role models, from people’s own social world or from outside it, but they may also be fictional characters from films or novels, well-known media personalities, politicians, historical or legendary figures, and many more. In that way we can learn about the art of living from masters in the art. The inspiration these role models provide is an important factor in the advancement of resilience.

(Joachim Duyndam, Joep Dohmen (pm), Gijsbert van Eijsden, Abdelilah Ljamai, Jacob Oeverbeek (pm), Mariëlle Schuurman (pm) and Adri Smaling)
7. The intended outcomes

The several sub-questions in this project, which will be handled by the participating researchers individually or in teams, will lead towards an abundance of international and Dutch-language scientific and popularizing publications. In addition to this they will supply concrete products that will be of importance for the humanists' fields of action, and for practices in which humanist organizations are actively at work. As far as the fields of action are concerned, within the framework of this research project we intend to organize seminars and special workshops on resilience for humanist counselors working in the care sector, for the Dept of Justice and for the Dept of Defense. Within a year from the start of the research project, we aim to organize a somewhat larger conference for those working in the field in the Netherlands and for humanistic organizations (HV, Humanitas, Hivos). Within two years from the start of this research project an international scientific conference is on the programme, in which connections will be investigated and mapped out between the traditional behavioral and social sciences and the humanities on the one hand, and the life sciences on the other, proceeding from the perspective set out in this project's research questions. After three years, when the end of this project's first term is in sight, a joint book production is anticipated, to which as many researchers as possible involved in this project will contribute, with interdisciplinary humanistics acting as a common framework.

8. Communication plan

Once in eight weeks, except in the months of July and August, a plenary project group meeting will be organized for reviews and consultations. In addition to this the three teams will meet either every month or every six weeks. The project group will subsequently build a bilingual website (Dutch and English) for the purposes of information and communication on the project. In this way it can add support for instance to workshops and the conferences (see above under point 7). To facilitate communication between the project participants an e-mail list will be produced and circulated.

9. Collaboration

This project is to begin as one of the four UvH research projects, which is intended to give the research carried out at the UvH focus and coherence. However it is our express aim to involve researchers from outside the UvH in this project, and also from institutions abroad. In the first place this will take place through the networks of participating researchers. For instance, in the sub-questions dealing with mimesis and role models there will be through interdisciplinary collaboration in the international Colloquium on Violence & Religion, of which Prof. Duyndam is a member. Through this network there are contacts with researchers in the field of mirror neurons at the University of California in Los Angeles. Other researchers, research groups and organizations outside the UvH, with which there will be cooperation, are (in alphabetical order):

• Association for Transpersonal Psychology and Institute for Transpersonal Psychology in San Francisco

• Compas Network International (network implementing field programmes to develop, test and improve endogenous development methodologies. Partners in the COMPAS network are NGOs and Universities in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America).

• International Society for the Study of European Ideas

• Nederlands-Afrikaanstalig Wijsgerig Genootschap (NAWG)

• North American Levinas Society

• Universiteit Gent – Wijsbegeerte & Moraalwetenschappen

• Valparaiso University, Indiana: international project Women in Interfaith Dialogue, directed by Nelly van Doorn-Harder

• Vrije Universiteit Brussel – Wijsbegeerte & Moraalwetenschappen

• Vrije Universiteit Brussel – vakgroep Agogiek, in het kader van het onderzoeksproject Praktisch Humanisme aldaar
10. External financing

For at least a number of parts of this project subsidy will be applied for from Imitatio Inc. (www.imitatio.com). Furthermore we shall look into the possibility of applying for subsidy from the Dutch NWO (Dutch governmental scientific research funding agency) for at least one PhD student and one research student. In addition to this, we shall look into the possibilities of indirect funding from social organizations like Humanitas, the unions, private organizations like training centers and provincial authorities.

11. Literature


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updated: 15 December 2010

Joachim Duyndam