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ToE Workshop Vught II: Technology & Societal Challenges 1800-2050: state of the art and future ambitions

(Vught, the Netherlands, 18-19 June 2018).

Summary of the discussions

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At the **Vught I** workshop (Spring 2016), we kicked-off the ToE flagship program on *Technology & Societal Challenges*—a successor program to the successful *Technology & European integration* program. The rationale: (1) Political, academic and public actors have great difficulty to make sense of the cavalcade of interrelated global crises that recently hit our modern world. Technology plays a major role, as alleged cause and suggested solution of such crises. Our network has the expertise and experience to critically examine interactions between technological, social and environmental changes; it is in a unique position to develop narratives and analyses of the ambivalent technological dynamics of grand challenges. (2) Instead of running after funding opportunities as individuals and individual research groups, we could build a collective research agenda, research network and fundraising strategy, which could enable a competitive and relevant (to us), informed, and qualified response to funding calls.

We decided to embark on an *explorative* program to, in the time span of 2-3 years, develop possible collaborations (i.e. building a new research network) and research agendas (which research questions are relevant? How could they possibly be answered?). This task was distributed over a number of working groups—experimentation spaces which, each in their own way, explore these issues and organize activities for a particular theme (e.g. the migration, energy, or resources challenge, sustainable urban mobility, or cross-cutting themes such a ‘governing technologies’ and ‘cultures of crisis’).

At the **Vught 2** workshop, working group coordinators evaluated their findings so far and discussed future ambitions and plans. Working group coordinators **reported their activities** of the past two years. These reports showed an impressive variety of initiatives, activities and results, and also very different ways of operating. A number of working groups successfully applied for local or research council seed money, and used that for consortium- and agenda building and further proposal writing. One group already won a prestigious H2020 research grant. Other working groups focused on workshops and joint publications, and a number of special issues are currently on their way. Several new working groups were established in the last half a year or so, and have only just begun planning/ organizing activities. Conversely, some older working groups were less active.



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Some themes are not yet part of our program and perhaps should be. These include water, agriculture & food (currently under “resources”); gender/poverty/inequality; ICT & Big Data; artificial intelligence and robotics. The ToE-Grand Challenges program is an open and bottom-up program, so all themes that have a coordinator and critical mass are most welcome. However, as a program, we do not *have to* be comprehensive at this point in time, for the point of an explorative program is to select arenas for experimentation and learning.

Getting different theme-coordinators at the same table raised a number of **important issues**. All expressed agreement that our topic is rich, inspiring, promising and important and that our current network is a strong one: we should engage with this topic, not as fragmented individuals/ research groups, but as a network that builds a strong research agenda, develops & shares knowledge. Another observation was that there are several notions of ‘grand challenges’ and ‘crises’ at play in the different networks. All agree that we should not essentialize and take for granted, but interrogate the concept. This may involve developing a new (meta) vocabulary. The concept of Anthropocene was debated as a possible frame.

There were also **differences**: Some argued for articulating the ‘specificity of Europe’ (also because this is where our expertise currently lies); others for taking a global history perspective. In addition, participants have different attitudes towards the relationship between professional history on one hand, and stakeholders/policy/public debates on the other (including ‘public history’). Some participants urged that historians need to intervene in, rather than just study, our problematic world. Others reported how they experiment with stakeholder co-creation (and raised the concept of the ‘usable past’). Still others emphasized – in different wordings – that the strength of professional history is its ability to engage from a position of strong professional autonomy in various debates. Either way: At this moment we are not looking for uniform answers or choices, but for raising deep and contentious questions, and experimenting with intellectual and organizational ways to answer them, in other words, to open up new horizons for research as well as engagement.

The session on **future ambitions** of the program featured a brainstorm and a debate. Some participants see the program mainly as a possibility for short-term experimentation with exciting ideas and people, or networking and grant proposal writing. Other participants supported the idea of a long-term, major scientific intervention in the form of a ‘landmark publication’, e.g. a high-prestige book series. Still others emphasized possibilities for policy and public interventions. The discussion underscores that we are not aiming for a ‘one size fits all’ plan. The program is ‘emergent’. Some participants may work on major scientific interventions, others on policy/public interventions, others on both.

Further sessions addressed the making of a *Technology & Culture* Forum special issue; the organization of sessions or roundtables at the upcoming 9th Tensions of Europe Conference in Luxemburg and the SHOT conference in Milan; funding options; and the program website.