# VB VAN POELJE AWARD 2019

## JURY REPORT

*Presented at the Van Slingelandtlezing, 29 October 2020*

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today we are happy to announce the winner of the 43rd Van Poelje Award. This Van Poelje prize is awarded for the best dissertation in the field of public administration in The Netherlands and Flanders. The prize is named after one of the founding fathers of public administration – Gerrit Abraham van Poelje (1884-1976).

The jury is composed of members from various universities and one practitioner, most of them previous winners: Taco Brandsen (Radboud University), Sanneke Kuipers (Leiden University), Albert Meijer (Utrecht University), Trui Steen (KU Leuven), Will Tiemeijer (WRR & Erasmus University Rotterdam), Bram Verschuere (Ghent University), and Esther Versluis (Maastricht University). This is Bram's last year as a jury member, and we would like to thank him very much for his efforts and commitment to the jury.

Before outlining the shortlist and the winner, we traditionally provide some insights into how PhD research develops over the years, by showing some facts and figures. The jury read 26 dissertations that we considered to belong to this longlist for a prize in public administration; five more than last year. 15% of the books were defended at Flemish universities, and 85% at Dutch universities. While last year saw more male candidates, this year we witness slightly more female candidates who finished their PhD (14 to 12).

The size of the books we read varies considerably between 88 and 482 pages, with the trend of dissertation becoming shorter and shorter being stalled this year. While last year saw an average length of 246 pages, this year's books on average contained 292 pages. This might tie in with the trend of article-based dissertation varying each year. This year

saw slightly more monographs compared to last year. Last year 33% of dissertations were monographs, compared to 38% this year. In terms of methodology, the return to a more qualitative methodological approach remains. While a mixed method approach remains popular, 35% of the dissertations applied a purely qualitative design. Next to interviews, surveys and process tracing, we have read work making use of, amongst others, participant observation, q-methodology, storytelling, QCA and agent-based computational modelling.

Overall, the jury has read many interesting dissertations and learned a lot about a wide variety of topics. We've read close to 8000 pages on, amongst others, the success of local low-carbon energy initiatives in Friesland, the role of evidence in the formulation of EU public policies, and the extent to which interest groups actually represent the opinion of citizens. It remains interesting and of added value to the quality of the research how inter- or multi-disciplinary the discipline of public administration actually is. Authors have connected their work to related fields such as social geography, criminology, social psychology, economics and science and technology studies, leading to strong new insights into public administration in the widest sense of the word.

After discussing the 26 books on the longlist – each book being read by three of the jury members – we selected four books to be nominated for the shortlist: two from Utrecht, one from Ghent and one from Antwerp. Two male, two female authors, all four using an article-based approach. These four finalists were read by all jury members.

In alphabetical order, the following dissertations were shortlisted for the Van Poelje prize 2019.

1. *Joram Feitsma – Utrecht University*
   *Inside the behavioural state*

This first dissertation on our list covers an important topic: the behavioural state. It has the ambition to help us understand what/who/where it is, really, this behavioural state, and does so by exploring the question: 'What can we learn about the behavioural state by studying its members and their practices from up close?' Having criticized the trend in public administration dissertations to focus too much on nitty-gritty small topics in past years, the jury was very pleased with this 'daring' work on a broad topic. From an anthropological perspective, using ethnographic fieldwork, Joram explores what happens

in reality by studying, interviewing and observing Dutch behaviour experts over the course of four years. Focusing on practices, professionalization and expertise, the empirical chapters explore the behavioural state from different perspectives. The strength of its approach, leading to tick descriptions of concrete examples, might be its pitfall simultaneously. At times the jury wondered whether the scope is sufficient to truly achieve insight into what the behavioural state is really. While a collection of articles, Joram managed to ensure that his work reads as a book. It is well written, and the individual chapters work well together as a coherent manuscript. Practitioners in the field are recommended to have a look at the concrete scenarios describing the expected future of the behavioural state.

2. *Shirley Kempeneer – University of Antwerp*
   *Breaking the bank. The regulatory implications of knowledge production through indicators*

This dissertation manages to convince the reader of its urgency from the first chapter onwards. The financial crisis clearly indicated the weaknesses in the banking sector and the introduction of stress tests using clear indicators should help prevent future failure. In her research Shirley asks what the regulatory implications are of the social processes through which indicators are calculated. The work innovatively combines public administration with science and technology studies. Applying actor-network theory, the empirical chapters resort to interviews and document analysis. While the jury appreciates the difficulty of entering the banking sector and finding respondents willing to shed light on this topic, we do wonder whether the number of interviews conducted provide sufficient basis for real in-depth insight into performance measurement. We would have liked to read even more concrete examples of how this unfolds in practice. We praise this dissertation for its strong reflection on the methodological choices made. Also an article-based dissertation, this is a school-book example of how to transform this into a coherent manuscript. In addition, the book is very well written, and the creative use of language and boxes at the end of the empirical chapters make the complex topic very accessible. The lessons learned identified in the concluding chapter will speak to practitioners working with performance indicators.

3.  *Tom Overmans– Utrecht University*

    *The austerity paradox. How municipalities (can) innovatively cope with fiscal stress*

Another dissertation covering the broader topic of finance, yet from a very different perspective. Tom explores how municipalities cope with fiscal crises, from an institutional capacity perspective. What institutional capacities work to advance innovation in austerity management at the municipal level? Focussing on three types of interventions – discursive interventions (talk), decisional interventions (decisions) and practical interventions (acts) – the dissertation analyses various municipal actors. Based on a collection of articles, the book in various chapters approaches this broader topic from different angles. The varying approaches in all chapters do make the work slightly less readable as a coherent book. The work is extremely rich in its methodological approach, ranging from a coding of more than 600 austerity responses in 8 Dutch municipalities, to a comparative case study between Birmingham, Cologne and Rotterdam, to elite interviews with municipal secretaries in 12 Dutch municipalities. We would almost say, don't try this at home! All of this makes this a dissertation that is empirically very rich. This is a must read for all municipal actors responsible for austerity management, particularly now with the current COVID-19 crisis further increasing the financial challenges for municipalities.

4.  *Tine van Thielen– Ghent University*

    *Performance management in policing. Context, process and outcomes*

The last dissertation on the shortlist analyses how performance management is effective in policing. It does so by focusing on what effects are generated by performance management in policing and how these effects are made possible by considering the actual implementation. Applying HRM system strength theory, performance management is interpreted as a cycle, making it a more interesting read compared to when using the output measurement with which it is normally associated. A stronger connection with public administration theories about performance management would perhaps even have strengthened the theoretical approach. The article-based approach of the work make the dissertation less readable as a coherent book. Practitioners will benefit from this works lessons which illustrate how context matters and that the effectiveness of performance management is strongly dependent on how it is implemented. All in all, Tine wrote a very

sound dissertation that is directly applicable in practice and that provides a new turn to the debate on performance management.

In the end only one book can win. Despite the difficulties of comparing these books, we picked a winner unanimously. The winning book is praised for its clarity in exploring a sector that is difficult to enter: the banking sector. This dissertation is a true example of how to make a book out of different articles. By using chapter titles strategically – *How indicators measure; How indicators manage; How indicators make* – the author manages to very concretely show the red thread and create a coherent manuscript.  For its readability and consistency, interdisciplinary character, and strong (methodological) reflections, the winner is …

Shirley Kempeneer for her book *Breaking the Bank*

*Prof.dr. Esther Versluis, chair, on behalf of the jury:*

*Prof.dr. Taco Brandsen, Dr. Sanneke Kuipers, Prof.dr. Albert Meijer, Prof.dr. Trui Steen, Prof.Dr. Will Tiemeijer, Prof.dr. Bram Verschuere*