

Evaluation of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS)

Comment of the board and management of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences

It is a pleasure for the board and management of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) to respond to the positive report of the evaluation committee, chaired by professor Giesen, that visited NIAS in November 2017. In formulating its comments the board also took into account the remarks made by the NIAS management (March 13, 2018) and the NIAS Scientific Advisory Board (March 19, 2018). The KNAW board would like to express its gratitude to the evaluation committee, the NIAS management and the Scientific Advisory Board for their extensive work, positive evaluation and constructive suggestions. Overall the suggestions are fully in line with the KNAW Strategic Agenda 2016-2020, in which the Academy intends to reinforce the connections between scientific disciplines and science organisations, between science and society and, internally, between the three societies and its research institutes. The text below discusses the recommendations of the evaluation committee one by one.

1. The selection process: Although the selection procedure has functioned well until now, and its primary focus on 'excellence' is to be continued, this is an element that needs to be addressed, in light of current demands as regards transparency. The procedure is already under review and most of the suggestions in the self-evaluation report seem worth considering further. The idea that the procedure is open is appreciated by the committee but increased clarity seems to be necessary to further attract the best possible fellows.

2. (.....) the Scientific Advisory Board should be expanded to at least twice its current size. Moreover, at the moment the Board is too limited in its scope: more disciplines should be represented, reflecting the broad area of Social Sciences and Humanities. At least one of these members should be an international IAS-specialist who knows the specific problems an IAS encounters. The expansion of the Scientific Advisory Board might also strengthen the negotiation (lobbying) position of NIAS with regard to the Dutch universities as well as the KNAW (see also #6).

These two recommendations are jointly addressed. The KNAW board agrees that the fellows-selection process should be more transparent with continued focus on excellence. In pursuit of this objective, the Scientific Advisory Board should be expanded and its composition should be broadened, whilst maintaining a position of independence. This will enrich the tasks of the Scientific Advisory Board, ensure engagement and contribute to increased visibility of NIAS.

The broadened and expanded Scientific Advisory Board should be primarily responsible for ranking candidates for fellowships based on evaluation of their applications. The NIAS management should take final responsibility for the quality, efficiency and transparency of the selection process and should guarantee diversity of the groups of fellows and stimulate group synergy. An increased role of an expanded Scientific Advisory Board should reinforce the selection process without extending its duration and further augmenting bureaucratic procedures and should not hamper its other statutory tasks as an independent advisory body for the NIAS management. The KNAW board invites the NIAS management and the Scientific Advisory Board to further professionalise the selection procedure in line with these concepts.

3. A national institute: NIAS should continue to emphasize its role as a national institute for scientists from all of the country and from abroad. In the international context, and for its international outreach, it actually makes sense for NIAS to portray itself as a Dutch institution; especially since NIAS is in Amsterdam, the Dutch context has a lot to offer, certainly in the

humanities and social sciences. (.....) Occasionally, the presence of fellows from the life sciences is to be welcomed, also in order to be attractive as an interdisciplinary platform for the broad variety of Social Science and Humanities, but it should not become NIAS' core business to attract people from the natural sciences.

The KNAW board agrees with the recommendation of the evaluation committee. The board is grateful that the evaluation committee provided support for the recent move of the institute to Amsterdam. This move, in conjunction with the appointment of a new director, places NIAS in an excellent position to develop an ambitious strategy towards further promoting its national position.

The board emphasizes that the full spectrum of opportunities that this recent move to Amsterdam provides with regard to visibility and positioning in the national and international context, still needs to be realised. With respect to the bridge to the (life) sciences, the board agrees with the NIAS management and the Scientific Advisory Board that the humanities and the social sciences should remain the core business of NIAS, and that connections to the (life) sciences should be actively explored in cases of added value.

4. Financial stability: We would strongly advise against any further budget cuts. There is an obvious tendency to recommend this with regard to excellent institutes, but the committee stresses that this statement goes well beyond that standard reflex. The quality of service and staff at NIAS is still very high, despite the cutbacks through the years, but it is of the utmost importance for NIAS that things stay that way in order to maintain its current position in the field of IAS's where competition is growing. Thus, it is equally important that the budget for the staff and fellows is not reduced any further. The staff is now dedicated but small in size, and thus vulnerable. We suggest KNAW to seek responsibility here also, e.g. by contributing to repair the situation with regard to the limited equity and to help out when specific investments are needed.

The NIAS management indicated that without a substantial increase in the NIAS budget, the ambitions in terms of public visibility, summer schools, workshops, and modern research support, cannot be realised. The Scientific Advisory Board noted that investments are needed in the support of the selection process, the intensification of the alumni policy, the search for sponsors, and the improvement of the communication process.

The KNAW board is fully aware that the recent budget cuts have substantially reduced the number of staff and fellows. *Ceteris paribus*, the board does not intend to further decrease the NIAS budget in the coming years. The KNAW board also welcomes the conclusion that, despite recent cutbacks, the quality of service is still considered as very high. Based on these conclusions, there might still be some room for immediate efficiency improvements within the limitations of the current budget, and the NIAS directorate is currently exploring these options with the support of the KNAW board. Subsequently a strategic agenda containing a thorough multiannual financial substantiation, should be established, in order to realise the full spectrum of ambitions and to enhance the long-term viability of NIAS. In drawing up such an agenda, the NIAS management should involve the Academy's Science Funds Department and the Events Department.

5. Cherish your alumni: To increase its visibility in the long run and to put more emphasis on its academic successes, but also in relation to its knowledge utilization, it is advisable for NIAS to actively stay in touch more with the fellows after they have left, and make use of their strong commitment to NIAS by defining them as ambassadors. The 'follow up' strategy needs to be professionalized such that in publications, prizes and awards of alumni the relation with NIAS becomes better visible. (.....) The committee advises that an overarching Alumni strategy be thought out, e.g. to improve visibility and create more funding by relating to these alumni.

The KNAW board agrees with the Scientific Advisory Board and the NIAS management to make more use of alumni as 'active ambassadors' for NIAS than is currently the case, and sees the recent revival of the Alumni Board as a concrete step in this direction.

6. Lobby for the institute: The institute needs a strong advocate, reflecting the important and unique position it has among the KNAW (research) institutes; its vulnerability financially demands a somewhat stronger sense of urgency from the leadership and the power to lobby its cause effectively (see #2 also). Here too, we wish to stress how important it is to increase support (practical and financial) from universities, and faculties. (.....) Support of university administrations (and the VSNU) is important, but to really gain that support, the added value for a university is apparently often still too unclear. Since there are no regular output indicators to help out here, which might make it more difficult for NIAS to legitimize its position, there is ample need for a strategy to make its output, through the fellows, more visible. See also recommendation #5.

The Scientific Advisory Board agreed that the support for NIAS in the Dutch research system should be increased, necessitating an active role of the NIAS management, the Scientific Advisory Board and the KNAW board. The NIAS management stated that the development of a professional communication strategy and new financial support policies form important priorities for the coming years. The 'follow up' strategy will be further professionalised, in order to render the connection between NIAS and the alumni's publications, prizes and awards made more visible. But the NIAS management expressed the opinion that without a substantial increase in the institute's budget, NIAS' ambitions in terms of public visibility cannot be realised.

The KNAW board, in consultation with the NIAS management, will actively help maintain and enlarge the practical support for NIAS in the Dutch research system. In line with the KNAW strategic agenda 2016-2020 the board underscores that reinforced inspirational interactions with universities and faculties, as well as with the members of The Academy, The Society of Arts and The Young Academy would help increase visibility and help invest in the ties with universities.

7. Communication strategy & visibility: Investments are necessary in the area of the communication strategy because the aims and strategy of NIAS are not fully broadcasted as of yet, leaving its visibility less than to be desired. (.....) But continuity in communication strategies demand ongoing commitment and the investments to back that up. Given the financial state of affairs, this is a dilemma, but the committee would expect the KNAW to be of assistance here were possible to make sure that scientific creativity and inspiration can continue to thrive at NIAS.

The Scientific Advisory Board suggested to appoint a (part-time) communication attendant for actively approaching the media, organizing book presentations, and collaborating with local and national partners that can reach an audience with scientific interest.

The KNAW board supports the continued involvement of the Academy's Communication Department as a strategic sparring partner for NIAS to further contribute to the NIAS communication strategy and visibility.

The board and the management of the KNAW trust that NIAS will make efforts to implement the recommendations successfully in the next years.

Amsterdam, April 2018