



Joint Reaction of the NIAS Scientific Advisory Board and Directorate to:

Owls and Canaries Fly Free

Evaluation Report Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences, 2018-2024

We would like to start our combined reaction to the report of the Autumn 2024 evaluation of the performance of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences in the academic years 2018-2024 by greatly thanking the members of the evaluation committee. They have fulfilled their task in a very careful way and constructively recognised that the context in which NIAS realised its mission in the six evaluation years was exceptionally difficult. Then to be praised “an excellent institution that should be cherished by the KNAW and by the wider Dutch research community” (p.2) is all the more significant to us. We are proud to have met the highest expectations and acknowledge that we could not have done so without all staff members contributing throughout the period under evaluation, all partners, support foundations, the NIAS Fellows Association, our Scientific Advisory Board and the added members advising on our fellows’ selection, and the colleagues at the HuC Shared Services Centre, the KNAW Bureau and other KNAW institutes.

We appreciate not only the committee’s commending qualification of our institution, but also their strategic recommendations. Below, we wish to elaborate on and respond to them. We first address the recommendations pertaining to our *owl-function* (and will do so in numerical order of the committee’s report) and then move on to those concerning what we have come to call our *canary function*. The two functions reflect the double mission that NIAS has formulated, namely of:

1. offering ‘an intellectual haven’ for scholars, artists (including writers) and journalists who carry out cutting-edge research at the highest levels, both individually and by actively engaging in our trans-disciplinary research community;
2. together discussing ‘meta-thematic’ issues, such as academic freedoms and aspects of research methodologies and ethics, in order to promote and advocate our core vision of curiosity-driven research.

Recommendations in the owl’s domain

With regard to the committee’s recommendations 4 and 5, on artistic research, we confirm that we will indeed be reaching out to more art institutions, in order to strengthen our understanding and experience of research in all artistic disciplines. This will also feed into the working group on ‘Arts and Sciences’ of the European network of institutes for advanced study, NetIAS. Next to the arts field, we will seek more strategic partners in the world of journalism, in order to enhance and secure the participation of journalist-fellows into the future. In all partnerships, existing and new, NIAS aims for the partners’ coverage of a solid part of the real costs (recommendation 8.b). We work towards more income per partner, as we cannot add more partners without compromising the space for fellowships in the open competition.

We welcome recommendation 8.c, which indicates that 1.0 fte additional ‘support staff’ is on point. Such additional capacity will indeed counteract the staff shortage that has made itself direly felt in the years under evaluation, one reason being that the efficiency implemented along with the 2016-17 relocation of NIAS from Wassenaar to Amsterdam coincided with an additional expectation of our performance, namely that the fellows’ insights be actively shared



with Dutch academia and the wider public. NIAS wholeheartedly supports public engagement; the committee found that this ambition was more than adequately materialised. However, they also recognised that it requires staff capacity of a quality that NIAS did not have (anymore), to help fellows build relevant networks and to make fruitful matches between them and platforms of public debate. In the evaluated years, NIAS did indeed add to the qualitative capacity of its staff. But the qualitative turn so far implied losing on quantitative capacity, and thus on staff wellbeing. We appreciate the committee's signaling (recommendation 8.a) of the fact that the restructuring of 2016-17 was not on all accounts considerate of the set-up of an institute for advanced study and needs adjustment.

Alternative staff quality was not only realised towards our public engagement, but also in order to be better equipped for, among other strategic aims, partnership development, benchmarking and policy development in such fields as fellows' services and selection procedures. With regard to the latter, NIAS reported significantly growing numbers of applicants for a fellowship. We are content to read that the committee applauds the interventions undertaken to keep the parallelly growing workloads involved manageable, while at the same time enhancing the diversity of our cohorts and the accessibility of our procedures for fellows from the 'Global South'. We are furthermore happy that our ambition of having one third fellows affiliated or based in the Netherlands, one third in the 'Global North' and one third in the 'Global South' is solidly supported, along with our underpinning convictions that this is both fair from the perspective of the global academic ecosystem, and beneficial to the quality of research at NIAS. We agree with recommendations 9, 10 and 11, where the committee urges us to continue evaluating and adjusting recruitment and selection procedures.

Next, we eagerly comply with recommendation 14 that focuses on fellows affiliated to Dutch universities and the triple problematic they represent: (a) their applications and the granted fellowships are unevenly spread over the universities (even over those with social sciences and humanities faculties); (b) the grand total of their applications in the NIAS open competition is dropping, from about one third to some 20% over the evaluation period; (c) the grant is perceived and criticized by universities as too low in financial terms, requiring universities to add funds for teaching replacements. NIAS will work to overcome all three shortcomings, such as by targeted communication of our calls and by increasing per 2026-2027 the 'Dutch University Grant' to match the stipends made to foreign and non-affiliated researchers. Moreover, NIAS will reach out to Dutch universities to enhance collaboration, even though the current budgetary and staffing situation of both Dutch universities as well as NIAS are difficult. To further strengthen the links between Dutch universities and NIAS, we have decided to invite the CvB of all universities to the NIAS Opening of the Academic Year. Some of them will actively contribute to the debate on institutional autonomy, a theme that will be introduced by professor Claudine Gay, former president of Harvard. Moreover, in the context of the Safe Haven Program, close collaborations have developed with the sponsoring universities (Maastricht University and University of Amsterdam). Finally, the new NIAS director will be in regular contact with the deans of humanities and social sciences faculties, to discuss developments regarding fellowship possibilities at NIAS and their participation therein. The Scientific Advisory Board suggests – in this context- that also research schools in the humanities and social sciences, both university-based and national, can offer inspiration for further collaboration.



Recommendations in the canary's domain

The *canary-function* (or signaling function) significantly increased during the evaluation years, for one part as a result of our re-evaluation of the core mission of an institute for advanced study, and for another due to the context of growing threats to academic freedoms. These take place in all times and in many parts of the world, as we have always seen at NIAS and increasingly highlighted in the public events in the evaluation period. It is thus important to emphasise that what is currently happening in the USA is not something new, but rather a seemingly surprising manifestation of authoritarian, anti-intellectualist and anti-science policies in today's liberal democracy.

In their recommendations 1 and 2, the committee correctly states that academic freedoms entails one, but not the only meta-theme NIAS does and should bring forward. Other appreciated meta-themes are the (management of) diversity, and interdisciplinarity (or cross-fertilisation)—both intensively exercised at NIAS. We also much agree that our work on meta-themes crucially feeds into the 'Forum function' of the KNAW (their national advisory task on all things academic), and that the discussion on whether NIAS is a research institute or an 'infrastructural' entity within KNAW, is ultimately arid. Reality is, that research carried out at the highest level (including by a Nobel Prize winner) is NIAS' core business and that NIAS contributes to all goals set for all KNAW institutes. NIAS' specific relevance to the KNAW Forum function further adds to its rightful place within KNAW. We thus fully agree with recommendation 6 that says that NIAS should be treated in all respects as the other KNAW research institutes. The temporary nature of the research fellowships should not work out to deny access to funding or to the 'research institute' label.

We are glad that by recommendations 1 and 6 the committee states that NIAS should be enabled to add sufficient staff capacity to manage and synthesise the meta-thematic knowledge that is accumulatively produced by the consecutive fellows' cohorts—and should not go lost when their fellowship terms end. Moreover, it should be beyond discussion that NIAS can establish (semi-)permanent research programmes, which represent both historically and in the present day an intrinsic part of an institute for advanced study. Recommendation 7 indeed calls NIAS an exception to the rule that applies to the vast majority of its sister institutes. As for the envisaged first multi-annum research programme, we aim to follow up on recommendation 3, where the committee argues that NIAS is in a pivotal position to help forge alliances among various democratic institutions, such as the free press, the arts, independent judiciary and civil society. In these dark days for liberal democracy, we have the ambition to broaden our investigation into the specific and comparative workings of all its pillars.

Next to studying (conditions favorable for) academic freedoms and liberal democracy at large, we practice what we preach. We are delighted that the committee (on their page 11) acknowledges the importance of our Safe Haven Fellowship Programme, even though we are (all) aware that what we offer is still very limited given the worldwide need of safe spaces. It is for that reason that the Scientific Advisory Board proposes to make NIAS a central player in developing a more ambitious programme for scholars at risk (including artistic and journalistic researchers). We refer to the attached proposal and wish to add that, in addition to partners in the Dutch academic world and beyond, we seek the support of the KNAW and KNAW institutes for the Safe Haven Fellowship Programme.



NIAS

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All in all, NIAS learned a lot throughout the undertaking of the evaluation that brought forward the recommendations to which we now respond, and is greatly appreciative of the energy and expertise the committee members invested in the process. We are very excited about the supportive and stimulating insights they offered and are embarking on our future with confidence in our relevance and impact.

On behalf of all members, Halleh Ghorashi, Chair of the NIAS Scientific Board

On behalf of the directorate and staff, Jan Willem Duyvendak, NIAS Director

Attached: Proposal re. Safe Haven Fellowship Programme