

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

*Owls and Canaries Fly Free*

January 2025

# Preface

This report presents the findings and recommendations resulting from a peer review of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS). Our committee was appointed by the Board of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW).

In brief, the committee finds that NIAS is an excellent institution that should be cherished by the KNAW and by the wider Dutch research community, including universities and other research institutes. NIAS has taken on the recommendations of the previous positive evaluation, resulting in much improvement in the working and organisation of NIAS, despite the challenges imposed by the pandemic. NIAS retains its commitment to providing a safe haven for interdisciplinary and international scholarship and research, and has substantially increased the participation of researchers from the Global South, including from authoritarian regimes and conflict zones.

This report is based on a self-evaluation report provided by NIAS, additional documentation requested by the committee, and meetings with NIAS staff, past and present fellows, and societal partners during a site visit on 26-27 November 2024. This report includes reflections on past activities and future possibilities, and includes several recommendations for NIAS and the KNAW Board.

As chair, I would like to express my gratitude to the other members of the committee for their expert and candid discussions during the site visit and for their input to this report. The work was intense, but also pleasant and intellectually rewarding.

On behalf of the committee, I wish to express our appreciation to all fellows, staff and partners of NIAS, past and present, for their open and constructive participation in this process.

We hope that this report marks the beginning of another period of NIAS being able to provide researchers from around the world with an intellectual haven for conducting high quality, curiosity-driven research.

*Prof. dr. Sally Wyatt*  
*Chair of the NIAS peer review committee*

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# 1. The evaluation

## 1.1 Objectives of the evaluation

As one of the institutes of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), NIAS has been evaluated by an international review committee, commissioned by the KNAW Board. This evaluation is part of the regular quality assurance cycle of all institutes, and conducted according to the Strategy Evaluation Protocol (SEP 2021-2027). Six years have passed since the previous evaluation, which means that this evaluation covers the years 2018-2024.

The current SEP invites a review committee to reflect not only on the realisation of the aims and ambitions a unit has set for itself in the past six years, but also on its plans for a sustainable future. In line with this, the KNAW Board has asked the evaluation committee to evaluate the academic quality of NIAS and its relevance to academia and society, both in retrospect and future-oriented.

Some adjustments had to be made, as NIAS does not conform to the definition of a research unit in the strict SEP sense: there are no tenured faculty or research programmes and no PhD students. Rather, the mission of NIAS is to offer a safe haven and a vibrant environment to its fellows. They come from all over the world and from a variety of backgrounds, in order to practise blue sky, curiosity-driven research and slow science (see also Section 2.1).

The SEP requires an assessment of the research quality of the unit to be evaluated, and a review of its open science policies. For NIAS, instead of evaluating the ‘research quality’ of individual researchers who are at NIAS for only five or ten months, the committee focused on the selection process used to ensure the academic merit of NIAS fellows individually and as a community. Regarding open science policies, the committee considered the involvement of NIAS with societal stakeholders in realising its mission. In accordance with the SEP guidelines, the committee focused on NIAS’ societal relevance, its viability, academic culture and HR policy.

In the Terms of Reference (ToR), the KNAW Board requested the committee to consider three questions concerning the recruitment process, the working conditions at NIAS, and its national role. These are addressed in Section 2.2.4 of the report.

## 1.2 The committee and its work procedure

Five members of the international peer review committee were appointed (see Appendix I for bios):

- Prof. dr Sally Wyatt (chair), Digital Cultures, Maastricht University
  - Dr Karwan Fatah-Black, Dutch Colonial History, Leiden University and Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV)
  - Prof. dr Birgit Meyer, Religious Studies, Utrecht University
  - Emily Pethick, Director Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam
  - Dr Thorsten Wilhelmy, Comparative Literature, Executive Manager Einstein Foundation, Berlin
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- Dr Patricia Faasse was appointed as an independent secretary to the committee.

Prior to the site visit at NIAS in Amsterdam, the committee received and studied the following documents:

- *NIAS 2018 SEP Committee's Report*
- *KNAW Reaction to the 2018 SEP Report*
- *NIAS Director's reaction to the 2018 Report*
- *NIAS 2020-2023 Strategy Plan*
- *2023-2024 Update of the 2020-2023 Strategy Plan*
- *Terms of Reference (ToR) NIAS 2024 SEP Committee*
- *SEP 2021-2027*
- *NIAS self-evaluation 2018 – 2024*
- *Success rates of Dutch Universities in the NIAS Open and Partnered Calls*
- *Data on disciplinary diversity*
- *Data on partner participation*

During the site visit the committee received additional information regarding:

- *NIAS Code of Conduct*
- *NIAS Fellows' House Rules for All Users*

The site visit took place on November 26-27, 2024. The programme is included in Appendix II.

During the site visit the committee had the opportunity to talk with the NIAS Directorate, former and current NIAS Fellows, the Board of the NIAS Fellows Association, NIAS partners, NIAS staff, members of the NIAS *Wetenschapscommissie* and the NIAS Academic Advisory Board. At the end of the site visit, the committee presented its preliminary observations and recommendations to NIAS staff and fellows.

## 2 Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS)

### 2.1 Mission and strategy

The mission of NIAS is to offer an intellectual haven to a diverse year-group of international scientists, writers, journalists and artists, and to provide these NIAS fellows with the opportunity to devote themselves to an independent research project of their own design. NIAS provides the time and space for free and curious deliberations between individual researchers from many corners of society, both within and beyond the academic realm. NIAS fellows exchange ideas and collectively reflect upon their ontological and epistemological assumptions. Building on the outcomes of these exchanges that challenge existing boundaries between academic disciplines, between academia and other knowledge domains (especially the arts), and between national cultures, the institute contributes to debates regarding the value of and threats to academic freedoms, the importance of 'slow science', the tensions between inclusivity and diversity, and the value of interdisciplinarity.

NIAS views academic freedoms as a prerequisite for ground-breaking research by academics, writers and artists. Therefore, NIAS is becoming a place where academic freedoms are not only provided (in fellowships), but also studied (with fellows, among others), advocated and defended.

NIAS is convinced that the best environment to nurture ground-breaking research is characterised by diversity at all levels, and has thus assumed the task of ensuring that the institute – a 'safe haven' for research – will be more widely accessible and inclusive.

NIAS has set three goals to achieve its mission:

- Bolster the profile of NIAS by targeting a broad range of academics, writers and artists as well as more general and strategic audiences.
- Attract high-quality fellowship applications to build diverse and balanced year groups.
- Provide a sustainable environment and a safe workplace for fellows, alums, staff and visitors.

## 2.2 Review and recommendations

### 2.2.1 Research quality, including academic culture

As outlined in the Terms of Reference (ToR), NIAS is not a research unit with its own research programme and staff in the sense of the SEP. It is an internationally recognised institute devoted to the 'blue sky principle' and 'slow science', offering space to work and think to individual fellows and theme groups. Since 2018, NIAS has started to develop a new policy to address meta-themes relevant to research. This implies that NIAS focuses on "academic merit and performance", not only in terms of research carried out by individual fellows but also as part of the Fellows group' (ToR, p.2). Hence the committee evaluated the research quality by considering both the selection of individual fellows *and* its new research policy to work on meta-themes as part of the fellows' group. The committee found no cause for concern, and was overall impressed with the ways in which the NIAS directorate and staff approach these complex tasks and provide an inclusive academic culture.

#### Selection of individual fellows

In the period under review, NIAS aligned its core values of facilitating 'blue sky research' and 'slow science' in an international and interdisciplinary setting (its 'owl function'), to the demands regarding knowledge formation in our pluriform and polycentric world. This implies that the scope of internationalisation had to be extended to include the Global South, and interdisciplinarity was even more inclusive towards artists, writers, journalists and other professionals. The committee found that NIAS has undertaken a clear analysis of its role and purpose as an eminent institute in a changing national and international academic context. We were impressed to see that NIAS staff members are engaged in constant critical self-evaluation so as to match its mission and actual operation, and pro-actively develop strategies to enhance the accessibility of NIAS for fellows beyond the more conventional target groups in institutions in the Global North. NIAS formulated the explicit goal to 'build diverse and balanced year groups in terms of discipline, topical relevance, career stage, gender, cultural and geographical background' (Self-Evaluation, p.14), and sharpened the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for achieving it.

The committee was impressed to find that in order to foster diversity of fellows, NIAS has reconfigured and refined its application scheme, by including more fellowships that are (partly) financed by third parties devoted to certain groups (e.g. journalists, writers, artists, women scientists), opening an online desk for prospective applicants to provide information about written and unwritten rules, and by actively employing its network of institutions and individuals (including former fellows) in the Global South. This snowball method proved to be suitable to enhance the number of high profile applications. Also, the Safe Haven Fellowships for researchers-at-risk greatly contribute to enhancing diversity. In the current year (2024-25), the fellows group at NIAS mirrors the envisioned goal of having equal proportions of fellows from the Netherlands, the Global North and the Global South. It has a good mix of early/mid-career and senior fellows (the latter sometimes upon the invitation of the institute) which is conducive to creating intellectual synergy.

The committee held discussions with NIAS staff involved in the application procedure (e.g. distributing the call, contact with prospective applicants, eligibility check of proposals, finding reviewers) and with the newly established Academic Advisory Board, which plays a key role in the selection process. These discussions demonstrated that selection is handled with great care, against the backdrop of the set goal, and both staff and board members clearly support the NIAS commitment to enhanced diversity. Also, the selection of researchers for the fellowships funded by third parties is monitored, in line with the specific requirements of the funders. The selection itself (or at least the final decision about a nominated fellow) is always conducted on the level of NIAS. As the fellowships funded by third parties pertain to researchers located in the Netherlands, there are fewer opportunities for researchers from Dutch universities. This is a point of concern for the committee, as we recommend that NIAS maintains close contacts with the universities for the sake of its viability (see Sections 2.2.2 and 2.2.4).

NIAS has already introduced elements into the selection procedure that will allow the assessment of potential fellows' preparedness to contribute to the NIAS community in a positive way. The committee considers this to be an experiment and recommends that these elements are monitored and evaluated by the Academic Advisory Board. On the whole, the committee is very positive about the quality of the selection process, and recommends that NIAS pursues advertisement and selection along the lines set out and to monitor how it functions (see Section 2.2.4).

It is not the task of the committee to evaluate the quality of individual fellows. Nonetheless we would like to remark that the range and quality of publications produced at NIAS is impressive. We welcome the efforts of NIAS to document the long-term effects of a NIAS fellowship over a period of ten years. Through three interview rounds with groups of former and current fellows we could gain insights into the impact of a fellowship for researchers. Again and again we heard that past fellows look back with pleasure, stating, for instance, that being at NIAS was 'academically life-saving', pushed them beyond their own disciplinary boundaries, made them situate their research question in a new, unexpected light, receive valuable feed-back from an interdisciplinary angle, and even that it was 'the best time in my academic life'. Some described being at NIAS in terms of gift-exchange, allowing to give back to others in academia the good practices learned at NIAS, for example, setting up a joint reading group in the home university and applying lessons learned about how to manage research groups with care. Journalist-researchers also reported positively that their fellowships had opened up new insights and formed a break with their usual deadline-driven way of working, allowing them to embark on a book project. Fellows in the Safe Haven programme reported that NIAS was a peaceful place to conduct their research, and they cherished the academic freedom offered.

Of course, as stated by the NIAS staff and fellows, increased diversity can intensify tensions and conflicts that sometimes may impede productive conversations among the fellow group as a whole. Fellows reported that the measures taken by NIAS staff to address problems were appreciated and effective. This is the background of the new Code of Conduct, introduced in September 2024, which is binding for fellows and staff. The committee finds that NIAS has good measures in place to allow for a productive research environment, which lives up to its owl-function and at the same time offers possibilities for cross-pollination and unexpected insights that draw researchers out of their academic comfort zone.



## New research policy and academic culture

If, in the 1970s it was the task and mission of NIAS to enhance the interdisciplinary and international outlook of Dutch academia, today the academic field in the Netherlands faces new challenges. Aligning 'blue sky' research and 'slow science' associated with the longstanding 'owl function' to the transformation of the global academic field made NIAS add what it calls the 'canary' function. Facilitating increased diversity alerted NIAS to the importance of academic freedoms. This pertains not only to scholars-at-risk fleeing from conflict zones and authoritarian regimes. During the period under review, it has become apparent that academic freedom can no longer be taken-for-granted as the presumed natural basis for academic work, but is coming under increasing pressure in many parts of the world. Reflecting on this process in the light of its everyday work, NIAS realised that it has a task not only to provide academic freedom to its fellows, but also to study and defend academic freedom in its role as a public ambassador of academic work. More broadly, in close conversation with current and past fellows, NIAS has developed a new policy of addressing themes on the meta-level of academic work, such as methodology, epistemology, research ethics and publication strategies. In this context, it launched several publications, set up a new open access book series with Amsterdam University Press, and organised a number of events devoted to academic freedoms. Given this new focus on meta-themes, NIAS decided to organise fewer public events featuring the work of fellows (see next paragraph). It has reduced the number of events organised in collaboration with institutions such as SPUI 25, and is preparing to discontinue its highly successful annual summer school and conference. NIAS now works entirely towards devoting its public events to meta-themes, namely academic freedom at this moment.

The committee praises NIAS for increasing public visibility in Amsterdam after its move from Wassenaar. At the same time, it agrees that NIAS must prioritise, given the small size of the staff and the plethora of events already organised by other institutions. The committee supports the idea of NIAS to concentrate on meta-themes. Profiling the work of fellows can and does happen through initiatives taken by public debate platforms, and by colleagues at Dutch universities and other institutions. This means that maintaining good relations with them remains an important task for NIAS (see Section 2.2.4).

In our view, the choice for a meta-thematic approach befits an institute for advanced study in our time, which has a privileged position in discerning themes that matter to a broad range of scholars in the Global North and South. NIAS enhanced the interdisciplinary and international outlook of Dutch academia in the past and continues to do so. But today the academic field in the Netherlands, and the world at large, faces new challenges. Due to its experience of working with a highly diverse group of fellows, NIAS is the player *par excellence* to communicate broader insights about the basics of doing research in our time. Even if NIAS is perceived as 'infrastructure' by some, this does not imply that it acts merely as a host for individual researchers from all over the world. Shaping this infrastructure for knowledge production into a productive research environment raises pertinent questions about epistemology (thinking beyond eurocentrism), methodology (mixed-methods, role of positionality), research ethics (aligning with FAIR and CARE principles, and the KNAW's long-standing commitments to research integrity, see <https://www.knaw.nl/en/themes/research-integrity>), societal impact (activism and collaboration in relation to political issues), and research policy (conditions

provided by governments to facilitate free research). Addressing these questions requires a scientific approach that carefully considers and researches the various dimensions of the infrastructure that is at the core of NIAS work. Moreover, the work on meta-themes is of broader importance, also with regard to the Forum function of the KNAW.

## **Recommendations**

1. The committee recommends that NIAS further develops its focus on meta-themes, and that the KNAW Board and Bureau facilitate this process by acknowledging NIAS as a research institution with some research staff (in addition to the director). The insights developed by NIAS can be of great help for the KNAW in executing its Forum function.
2. KNAW should recognise that the valuable knowledge and expertise of NIAS fellows and staff has much to contribute to the Forum function of the KNAW (e.g. advice, outreach), and to other work of the KNAW (e.g. its own Diversity & Inclusivity policies and dealing with developments in academic freedom and interdisciplinarity).

### **2.2.2 Societal relevance, including open science**

NIAS demonstrates its social relevance through the diversity of fellows and their research, coming from the Dutch context and internationally, and the welcoming intellectual space that is created for open science and academic freedoms.

Beyond this, NIAS engages fellows in ongoing dialogue and forms of collective learning that draws from their individual research, related to matters going on in the world, and in relation to meta-themes, such as the current focus on academic freedoms (see previous section). In the committee's meetings with past and current fellows, they stated how they appreciated the ethical engagement, and being part of a larger project. They also commented on how they appreciated how NIAS staff and management organised NIAS in an ethical, non-rigid and caring way. As one fellow pointed out, not only is the topic of academic freedoms of relevance, but the topic of freedom more broadly. At NIAS this topic is researched, interrogated and discussed from many different social, (inter)disciplinary and geopolitical perspectives, which enables a rich and multi-layered continuous exploration of one of the crucial topics of our time, not only for academia. A former fellow emphasises this in a quote on the NIAS website (<https://nias.knaw.nl>):

Academic freedom should make it possible for researchers to systematically and fundamentally explore what they do not know. They should be able and allowed to question what they do know, to ask seemingly unanswerable questions, and to give questionable answers.

Throughout the site visit, the committee repeatedly heard about how much this ongoing exploration means to the fellows, as it gives context to what they do, and enables them to venture beyond their own familiar territories and horizons. It sets the tone for both the individual and collective work that takes place at NIAS, and represents a broad and inclusive notion of 'open science'.

NIAS is an environment where open science and interdisciplinary exchange are practised. It was clear to the committee from its discussions with fellows that this leads to innovation and societal relevance in their individual research and practices. Being open to each other's research and practices leads many of the fellows out of their comfort zones and into a space in which they can open up, critically examine, question and transform their own research and practices, as well as those of their colleagues. Repeatedly, we heard about how deeply challenging this is, and how the experience of working at NIAS led them to transform what they do. The combination of having researchers from diverse disciplines and knowledge bases together, whose work feeds into society in different ways – including through visual artworks, journalism, poetry, literature, social and medical sciences, academia, public lectures, debates and published outcomes – creates the potential for the outcomes of individual and collective research and engagement, to filter out into society in diverse ways.

Partnerships that have been developed extend the social relevance of NIAS, as they bring perspectives from a diversity of disciplines and other research-related practices, including journalism, literature, visual arts, women in science and partnerships with other KNAW institutes, such as IISH, KITLV, Meertens Institute and NIOD. Each partnership has its own selection procedures, which are monitored by the research committee to ensure quality of the process and of the outcome. Our meeting with partners underlined the high appreciation of the quality of the work of NIAS in fostering an interdisciplinary environment. Partnerships extend the reach of NIAS to recruit diverse fellows from specific disciplines, but it was also clear that the partnerships vary in their recruitment successes. In some cases, places are not offered if the quality of the applicants is not up to the standard expected at NIAS. As already mentioned, NIAS needs to monitor the number of Dutch places that are used up by the partnerships, as these reduce the number of open places for fellows based at Dutch universities. The partners appreciated the interdisciplinarity, the quality of the fellows and research that takes place at NIAS, and the emphasis on academic freedoms, which they all saw as having a high level of contemporary social and political relevance. They also commented on the approach to diversity as being multi-faceted, including epistemic diversity, and inter-national and inter-generational, which, through the possibility to exchange, also contribute to social relevance.

The Safe Haven Fellowships enable NIAS to extend the social relevance of its work by giving urgent support to scholars, artists and journalists at risk, and thereby responding to the most urgent needs of contemporary scholars who cannot continue their work because of the consequences of war and conflict. One Safe Haven fellow appreciated that the stability provided by NIAS gave them time to think. Fellows commented that the NIAS statements on the website in relation to Gaza were important to them, as was the opening of the 2024 academic year event, which defended the autonomy of the university. Safe Haven fellows are introduced into relevant networks that might support them in the future. Through this attention to the needs of fellows beyond their academic work, NIAS demonstrates its awareness of the additional conditions needed for these fellows to conduct their work (see also Section 2.2.3 on HR policy).

## Recommendations

3. Extend the discussion on academic freedoms to incorporate other elements of well-functioning democracies, e.g. free press, independent judiciary, active civil society, and cultural experimentation, and how they can support each other in times of increased threats to free-thinking.
4. Seek more partners in the arts, beyond the Royal Academy of Arts. This would reduce dependence on a single partner on arts-related topics, deepen the relationship to artistic research, and possibly enable NIAS to offer studio space to artists-in-residence. This could also broaden exhibition possibilities and other spaces for dialogue that offer a different kind of interaction between researchers and provide greater public visibility to the work generated.
5. Incorporate the expertise of artist fellows more fully within the NIAS experience. This already seems to be working for fellows who are professional writers (of fiction and journalism), but visual and performing artists bring something else. Steps could be taken to make collective spaces more flexible. The seminar room is adequate for meetings and workshops, but clearly less conducive to experimentation with workshop formats or for workshops organised by (visual) artists or film makers.

### 2.2.3 Viability, including HR policy

Regarding the future prospects of NIAS, the committee evaluated the sustainability of its mission, and staffing and HR policy.

#### Sustainability of NIAS mission

NIAS aims to provide its fellows with an intellectual and physical space that offers them the opportunity to take a step back from the usual demands of their everyday work. This can be to read, produce new work, and engage with others to generate new insights and plans for future work.

The committee found that NIAS continues to meet its core objectives of providing an interdisciplinary and international environment that allows fellows to flourish. These remain core principles, and will always need attention. Every individual and group needs to learn this for themselves. Despite the many checklists for doing interdisciplinary work well, it is a learning experience for all, and one that needs time and mutual respect. The committee was impressed by how NIAS fosters this collaborative environment, and at the same time tries to adapt to dramatic changes in the world.

During this evaluation period, NIAS has faced substantial challenges. The move from Wassenaar (during the previous evaluation period) together with the pandemic put enormous pressure on staff. With the appointment of a new director and a new institute manager, NIAS has been able to recover from these challenges (see also HR policy below).

NIAS receives most of its funding from the KNAW. This was reduced substantially as the previous evaluation period moved into the current one. To compensate for this, NIAS has successfully sought more partnerships with a variety of academic and societal partners. As well as providing much needed financial support, this has enabled NIAS to expand further the range of fellowships (see Section 2.2.2). However, the committee was concerned that the funding from most partnerships does not always cover the full costs of fellowships. Plus, given the missions of the partners, such fellowships come at the expense of the number of Dutch-based academic fellows. NIAS has the following objective regarding the distribution of fellows: one third Dutch-based, one third from other rich countries, and one third from the Global South. As the fellows funded by partnerships are Dutch-based, this inevitably means that fewer Dutch-based fellows can be accommodated from the Open Call. This could put strains on the relationship between NIAS and the universities (see below and Section 2.2.4, question 3).

NIAS is committed to providing its opportunities to scholars, artists, journalists and researchers from the Global South, from authoritarian regimes and from conflict zones. By opening up the privileges associated with institutes of advanced study, the problems of the world also enter what in the past was a more isolated space. NIAS staff are to be commended for their commitment to diversity and inclusion, and their recognition that these values also have consequences. (See HR policy below for more details about how NIAS has approached this.)

The committee appreciates the ways in which NIAS supports core academic values, values which are under growing pressure with greater political polarisation and attacks on science, scholarship, journalism, and the arts. Promoting such core values is also key to the mission of the KNAW itself, as the 'guardian and interpreter of science in the Netherlands' (on the English-language version of the KNAW homepage - <https://www.knaw.nl/en>).

In order to flourish in what are undoubtedly difficult times ahead, NIAS and the KNAW (Board and Bureau) need to build productive collaborations. Every year, NIAS attracts excellent fellows who have immense knowledge and expertise on a wide range of topics. One reason for the move to Amsterdam was to facilitate the sharing of this expertise, not only in Amsterdam but nationally. Individual fellows often build on their existing networks to give lectures and collaborate with Dutch universities and research institutes. Nonetheless, the committee felt more could be done to make best use of this expertise; for example, by offering lectures and expert meetings by NIAS fellows in close collaboration with the KNAW, making use of the physical facilities and personnel based at the Trippenhuis. NIAS has much to offer to the Forum function of the KNAW, and to realise this needs constructive collaboration (see also Section 2.2.1).

The committee was concerned by the very uneven distribution of applications and fellows from Dutch universities. Six universities have made fewer than 10 applications during this evaluation period, while several have made more than 70 (and with higher success rates). We were also concerned to hear that some universities discourage their staff from applying to NIAS because the financial compensation is not adequate to replace teaching. NIAS needs to strengthen its relationships with all Dutch universities. It is not our place to make recommendations for Dutch universities, but they need to acknowledge the high reputation of NIAS and the possibilities that a NIAS fellowship offers to their staff (including time to write, to build international and interdisciplinary networks, etc.). Despite the budget cuts facing education in the Netherlands,

Dutch universities should be encouraged to cover any financial shortfalls between the compensation offered by NIAS and the actual costs of teaching replacement. A first step could be for the NIAS director to attend the national meetings of deans to explain the long-term benefits for staff and their home institutions of becoming a NIAS fellow.

## HR policy

The staff of the institute consists of 7.5 fte (approximately 10 people). They provide hands-on support for the fellows, support the process of fellow selection, engage in communication about NIAS fellows and activities, and conduct academic tasks such as curriculum development and publication support. An additional 10 people are added via a service level agreement with the shared service centre of the Humanities Institutes Alliance of the KNAW (BB-HUC and ICT Services). This includes the library staff (1.0 fte) and administrative and facility services, including HR and finance. In comparison, the *Wissenschaftskolleg* in Germany employs 30 staff to support 40 fellows. Since 2022 (after the pandemic), NIAS has appointed more experienced staff to meet the strategic requirements of the work at the institute. They come from a range of academic backgrounds and experiences, reflecting the diversity of the city of Amsterdam. In conversations with the staff, the committee found that the team is very conscious of the balance between supporting the fellows and taking care of the team. The current team reviews its roles, changing for example from time-consuming 'hands on' troubleshooting to more effective monitoring of the compliance of third parties to service contracts. The team has also developed a vision of support for the well-being of fellows that is less service-oriented and more focused on creating cohesion and self-reliance by the visiting fellows. These transformations are clearly the result of choices made by the new Institute Manager, who actively coaches the staff in defining their roles. Work-related sick leave among the staff has rapidly declined and solidarity has increased since 2023.

The change in the orientation of the institute, with greater involvement of scholars from the Global South and Safe Haven fellows, has increased the sense of purpose and urgency among the staff to create a co-operative, interdisciplinary, blue skies environment for every new group of fellows. Protecting academic freedoms and sometimes also the personal security of fellows has on occasion meant that staff had to coordinate with the police about monitoring threats. The increased diversity of NIAS also means that new challenges are faced when supporting the fellows and their families. We commend the staff and management on its service to international academic freedom, and recognise that this has meant an increase to staff workload.

The committee found that there was a positive attitude among both newer and established NIAS staff. That said, a clear point of concern is the cooperation and support from the BB-HUC and KNAW ICT. NIAS staff experience a lack of understanding and, sometimes, a lack of commitment to the NIAS mission and the specific type of support an organisation like NIAS needs. Here the evaluation committee found much room for improvement in the definition and transparency of tasks and responsibilities in the relation between NIAS and the BB-HUC, and, to a lesser extent, between NIAS and the KNAW ICT services. The latter concerns peak needs during the weeks when fellows arrive and leave.

The committee observed that NIAS is a learning organisation which keeps up with developments in the humanities and social sciences. The current staff often combines roles that can be labelled service (OBP) as well as scholarship (WP). Acknowledging the (need for) scholarly contributions of staff is not formally recognised in the current set up of the organisation. There might be a need to change contracts to reflect that a certain percentage of the work is in fact of a scholarly nature. Given the quality of HR management, the high level of performance and the small size of the institute, the evaluation committee believes that the institute could benefit greatly from an addition to the staff of at least one full-time person (WP).

## Recommendations

6. To strengthen the role and position of NIAS in its field, the institute should be treated in the same way as other research institutes of the KNAW, and thus have possibilities to appoint research staff, apply for the KNAW's *Onderzoeksfonds* and for external funding (*2de en 3de geldstroom*).
7. How the status of NIAS (see above) and the Forum function (see recommendations in Section 2.2.1) are combined and organised needs to be monitored by the directorates of both NIAS and the KNAW. The current emphasis on 'academic freedoms' is pertinent, and builds on the tradition of institutes of advanced study globally and the excellent work already done. This includes the high-profile opening of the 2024 academic year and the publication of *Academische Vrijheden in Nederland Wat staat er op het spel?*, edited by Lucas Verburgt and Jan Willem Duyvendak. (A partial translation is available at the institute.) However, it needs to be recognised that meta-themes may change over time.
8. The committee is aware that there are ongoing discussions between NIAS and the KNAW on some of these points. During these discussions, we recommend that the following points are addressed:
  - a. KNAW and BBU-HUC must recognise the specific mission and practices of an Institute for Advanced Study and the needs regarding ICT support, HR, finance, and facility management as a matter of urgency.
  - b. NIAS should continue to explore with partners if they are willing to contribute more to all costs associated with hosting a fellowship.
  - c. Extra funding for 1.0 fte additional 'support staff', in order for the scholarly trained staff to focus on academic functions, such as running a book series, finding reviewers for fellowship applications and applying for funding. Additional staff might need to be on WP contracts.
  - d. NIAS could explore the use of more student assistants and/or student internships.
  - e. Increase the time for the NIAS director from 0.6 fte to 0.8 fte.
9. The committee welcomes the support of NIAS alums and the NFA, in increasing awareness about NIAS in the Netherlands and globally, by reviewing applications and offering to be buddies with new fellows (from similar disciplinary or cultural backgrounds). This should not be free labour, nor replacement for structural support.

## 2.2.4 Specific questions from the KNAW Board

*How can NIAS optimise its recruiting process to form fellow groups that are diverse in various ways, competent in carrying out their research projects, and committed to contributing to the broader themes NIAS considers important?*

The selection process used by NIAS underwent major revision as a result of the recommendations of the 2018 evaluation committee (see also Section 2.2.1). The current committee is very impressed by the results of this revision. NIAS has managed to diversify the group of fellows along many relevant dimensions in a convincing way: younger scholars and more advanced scholars are adequately represented, and the gender balance is exemplary compared to other institutes of advanced study. The envisioned mix of equal proportions of Dutch scholars, scholars from similarly wealthy countries, and scholars from the Global South is plausible as a heuristic approach. This should not become a rigid formula, and it is encouraging that the NIAS directorate, the *Wetenschapscommissie* and the Academic Advisory Board are in constant dialogue over the results and the procedure of their selection. Widening the responsibility for the selection has been a positive step for NIAS that already shows excellent results.

### Recommendations

10. The committee encourages NIAS to continue pursuing inclusion of established, internationally visible scholars with those still establishing their careers. However, it recommends that the span should not be overstretched on either end of the spectrum. For scholars who are too young (less than three years after the PhD), the opportunity to come to NIAS might come too early in order to unfold their potential and to benefit from the group's input. Senior scholars with an international reputation but whose contributions to their respective field date back many decades may no longer be interested in interactions with a dynamic and ambitious group.
11. Continue to evaluate recruitment and selection procedures in order to identify key factors of successful recruitment as well as dimensions of adjustment, as has been done with the co-selection with partners. (See also Section 2.2.1.)

*How can NIAS optimise the material, organisational, social and intellectual conditions conducive to free individual and collective reflection?*

With the move from Wassenaar to Amsterdam in 2016, NIAS aimed to transition from a 'cloister' to a 'beehive'. The aim is not only to provide fellows with time for individual reflection, but to enable collective and cooperative learning. The evaluation committee indeed found the NIAS premises to be 'buzzing' with activity.

The maintenance of a beautiful but older building is clearly a concern. At the moment the upkeep of the building is good. It offers enough well-furnished space for individual scholars and teamwork. The fellows seem to be content with the space. The conveniently located fellows



house is a great asset of the institute and clearly contributes to its appeal. The evaluation committee has not seen the family apartments, but has heard that these are spread out across the city, partly to facilitate access to schools for children of fellows. The experience of the fellows appears to be positive.

The library services are a crucial element of the fellows' positive experience at NIAS. The level of service is high, consisting largely of Inter-Library Loans. The library is understandably not able to offer on-site facilities for the consultation of other types of material, such as historical manuscripts, microfilm, digital media, art materials or studio services.

## **Recommendations**

In previous sections, we have discussed HR policy, selection procedures, and the intellectual environment offered by NIAS. We have two additional recommendations:

12. Explore sources of support for maintaining the building, and improving its accessibility. The first includes keeping it conducive to the institute's mission, and accommodating informal, serendipitous encounters. The second includes both physical accessibility and opening hours.
13. NIAS provides a focus room that also seems to function as a 'multi-faith prayer room' or, as the neighbouring University of Amsterdam calls it: 'contemplation room.' The double function of work space and space for quiet reflection is unusual and might have to be reconsidered.

*How can NIAS strengthen its national role (in the Netherlands) as intermediary across disciplines, connecting the worlds of arts and sciences, and using various sources of knowledge, building on research, experience and imagination?*

These points have already been addressed in Sections 2.2.1, 2.2.2 and 2.2.3. We are concerned about the uneven representation of Dutch university-based fellows, and the fewer number of places open to them in the Open Call as partnerships expand. However, we recognise the valuable resource provided by NIAS not only for Dutch-based fellows but also the expertise brought by international fellows every year. As already mentioned in Section 2.2.1, the KNAW and NIAS need to collaborate more strongly to ensure NIAS can fulfil its national role more fully.

## **Recommendation**

14. Strengthen communication and relationships with all Dutch universities, and consider how to approach them as an important stakeholder. In the current funding and political landscape in the Netherlands, it is important to build and maintain alliances.

## 2.2.5 Conclusions and Recommendations

NIAS continues to provide a valuable space for individual researchers, writers, artists and theme groups to pursue their scholarly and research interests. Interdisciplinarity and internationalisation remain core principles. As well as providing 'space to think', NIAS fosters a collaborative environment supported by the staff, fellows and underpinned by an updated Code of Conduct. NIAS is an excellent institution to be cherished by the KNAW and the wider research community in the Netherlands and beyond. It is a role model for how research could and should be done, and those who have benefited from being a NIAS Fellow bring the lessons learned at NIAS back to their home institutions.

The review committee recommends (same order as presented above):

1. The committee recommends that NIAS further develops its focus on meta-themes, and that the KNAW Board and Bureau facilitate this process by acknowledging NIAS as a research institution with some research staff (in addition to the director). The insights developed by NIAS can be of great help for the KNAW in executing its Forum function.
2. KNAW should recognise that the valuable knowledge and expertise of NIAS fellows and staff has much to contribute to the Forum function of the KNAW (e.g. advice, outreach), and to other work of the KNAW (e.g. own Diversity & Inclusivity policies and dealing with developments in academic freedom and interdisciplinarity).
3. Extend the discussion on academic freedoms to incorporate other elements of well-functioning democracies, e.g. free press, independent judiciary, active civil society, and cultural experimentation, and how they can support each other in times of increased threats to free-thinking.
4. Seek more partners in the arts, beyond the Royal Academy of Arts. This would reduce dependence on a single partner on arts-related topics, deepen the relationship to artistic research, and possibly enable NIAS to offer studio space to artists-in-residence. This could also broaden exhibition possibilities and other spaces for dialogue that offer a different kind of interaction between researchers and provide greater public visibility to the work generated.
5. Incorporate the expertise of artist fellows more fully within the NIAS experience. This already seems to be working for fellows who are professional writers (of fiction and journalism), but visual and performing artists bring something else. Steps could be taken to make collective spaces more flexible. The seminar room is adequate for meetings and workshops, but clearly less conducive to experimentation with workshop formats or for workshops organised by (visual) artists or film makers.
6. To strengthen the role and position of NIAS in its field, the institute should be treated in the same way as other research institutes of the KNAW, and thus have possibilities to appoint research staff, apply for the KNAW's *Onderzoeksfonds* and for external funding (*2de en 3de geldstroom*).

7. How the status of NIAS (see above) and the Forum function (see recommendations in Section 2.2.1) are combined and organised needs to be monitored by the directorates of both NIAS and the KNAW. The current emphasis on ‘academic freedoms’ is pertinent, and builds on the tradition of institutes of advanced study globally and the excellent work already done. This includes the high-profile opening of the 2024 academic year and the publication of *Academische Vrijheden in Nederland Wat staat er op het spel?*, edited by Lucas Verburgt and Jan Willem Duyvendak. (A partial translation is available at the institute.) However, it needs to be recognised that meta-themes may change over time.
8. The committee is aware that there are ongoing discussions between NIAS and the KNAW on some of these points. During these discussions, we recommend that the following points are addressed:
  - a. KNAW and BBU-HUC must recognise the specific mission and practices of an Institute for Advanced Study and the needs regarding ICT support, HR, finance, and facility management as a matter of urgency.
  - b. NIAS should continue to explore with partners if they are willing to contribute more to all costs associated with hosting a fellowship.
  - c. Extra funding for 1.0 fte additional ‘support staff’, in order for the scholarly trained staff to focus on academic functions, such as running a book series, finding reviewers for fellowship applications and applying for funding. Additional staff might need to be on WP contracts.
  - d. NIAS could explore the use of more student assistants and/or student internships.
  - e. Increase the time for the NIAS director from 0.6 fte to 0.8 fte.
9. The committee welcomes the support of NIAS alums and the NFA, in increasing awareness about NIAS in the Netherlands and globally, by reviewing applications and offering to be buddies with new fellows (from similar disciplinary or cultural backgrounds). This should not be free labour, nor replacement for structural support.
10. The committee encourages NIAS to continue pursuing inclusion of established, internationally visible scholars with those still establishing their careers. However, it recommends that the span should not be overstretched on either end of the spectrum. For scholars who are too young (less than three years after the PhD), the opportunity to come to NIAS might come too early in order to unfold their potential and to benefit from the group’s input. Senior scholars with an international reputation but whose contributions to their respective field date back many decades may no longer be interested in interactions with a dynamic and ambitious group.
11. Continue to evaluate recruitment and selection procedures in order to identify key factors of successful recruitment as well as dimensions of adjustment, as has been done with the co-selection with partners. (See also Section 2.2.1.)
12. Explore sources of support for maintaining the building, and improving its accessibility. The first includes keeping it conducive to the institute’s mission, and accommodating

informal, serendipitous encounters. The second includes both physical accessibility and opening hours.

13. NIAS provides a focus room that also seems to function as a 'multi-faith prayer room' or, as the neighbouring University of Amsterdam calls it: 'contemplation room.' The double function of work space and space for quiet reflection is unusual and might have to be reconsidered.
14. Strengthen communication and relationships with all Dutch universities, and consider how to approach them as an important stakeholder. In the current funding and political landscape in the Netherlands, it is important to build and maintain alliances.

## Appendix I: Committee Members

**Sally Wyatt** (chair) is Professor of Digital Cultures in the Maastricht University Science, Technology and Society (MUSTS) research group. She was Associate Dean for Research in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Maastricht University between 2020-2024. In 2023, she successfully shepherded the Faculty through its own research evaluation. Her research focuses on the development and use of digital technologies, particularly in healthcare.

**Karwan Fatah-Black** is a historian of the Dutch colonial empire and slavery. He is a member of *De Jonge Academie* (Young Academy), lectures at Leiden University and is senior researcher at the KITLV-KNAW.

**Birgit Meyer** is Professor of Religious Studies at Utrecht University. Trained as a cultural anthropologist, she studies religion from a material and postcolonial angle, seeking to synthesize grounded fieldwork and theoretical reflection in a multidisciplinary setting. Awarded with the 'Academy professor prize' and the 'Spinoza prize' in 2015, Meyer initiated the comprehensive research programme Religious Matters in an Entangled World ([www.religiousmatters.nl](http://www.religiousmatters.nl)) which she currently is conducting.

**Emily Pethick** is Director of the *Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten*, since 2018, an artist residency programme in Amsterdam that hosts around 50 international artists of up to two years. She previously directed contemporary art organisations in London and Utrecht, through which she has commissioned and produced many artists' work, and has written extensively about contemporary art, as well as co-edited and published numerous publications. Her specialism includes artists working with artistic research and socially engaged practices.

**Thorsten Wilhelmy** is Managing Director of the Einstein Foundation Berlin. Since 2003 he has held positions in research management and at the science policy interface. From 2012 until 2021 he was Secretary of the *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin*. He holds a PhD in Comparative Literature.

**Patricia Faasse** (secretary) is trained as a historian of science. She has written several books on the history of Dutch biological and natural sciences, commissioned amongst others by the KNAW, TNO and Utrecht University.

## Appendix II: Programme site visit

November 26, 2024

- 9.00 - 10.15 Meeting with NIAS Directorate (Director Jan Willem Duyvendak, Institute Manager Marlous Willemsen)
- 10.30 - 11.30 Meeting with seven former NIAS Fellows (Alan Cienki (2009-2010; 2023-2024), Pieter Coppens (2022-2023), Florian Lippert (2-21-2022), Annelies Moors (2022-2023), Jaap Tielbeke (2019-2020), Maartje van Gelder (2018-2019), Ellen Rutten (2019-2020))
- 11.45 - 12.45 Meeting with Board of the NIAS Fellows Association (Emmanuel Berger-treasurer, René Biemans-NIAS support staff, Ayşenur Korkmaz-current chair, Philip Spinhoven-former chair)
- 13.00 - 14.00 Lunch at the Fellows House
- 14.00 - 15.00 Meeting with six partners of NIAS that each co-fund a fellowship program (Markus Balkenhol (Meertens Institute), Marieke Bloembergen (NIOD-KITLV), Luc Coffeng (Golestan Foundation), Annette Mullink (NIAS Selection staff), Eva Prakken (Dutch Foundation for Literature), Lidwien Poorthuis (Dutch Network of Women Professors; Women in Science Fellowship Programme) Tom Springveld (Fund BJP, for special journalistic projects), Marlous Willemsen (NIAS Institute Manager)
- 15.15 - 16.15 Meeting with seven former NIAS Fellows (María Arche (2021-2022; 2023-2024), Egor Isaev (2023-2024), Fabian Krämer (2018-2019), Inge Meijer (2022-2023), Nadim Rouhana (2019-2020), Stella Nyanzi (2021-2022), Ed Schwarzschild (2023-2024) currently present in Amsterdam/the Netherlands)
- 16.30 - 17.30 Committee meeting

November 27, 2024

- 9.00 - 10.00 Meeting with NIAS Staff (Berthon Alberto, Rachida Azough, Marike Balster, René Biemans, Anja de Haas-Gruijs, Katariina Kujapelto, Klaartje Laan, Annette Mullink, Merlijn Olton, Bernike Pasveer)
- 10.15 - 11.15 Meeting with seven current NIAS Fellows (Nadia Ait Said-Ghanem, Philip Gorski, Amal Helles, Ying-Tzu Lin, Eyo Mensah, Leendert van der Valk, Dirk Vis)
- 11.30 - 12.30 Meeting with members of the Wetenschapscommissie (WeCo) and Academic Advisory Board (Halleh Ghorashi (new WeCo Chair), Anja de Haas-Gruijs (NIAS Selection staff, in person), Merlijn Olton (member of the staff working group on innovation of selection procedures, in person), Bernike Pasveer (NIAS Head of

Academic Affairs, in person), Joyashree Roy (Academic Advisory Board-member; not a WeCo-member, online), Johan Schot (former WeCo Chair, in person), Pablo Valdivia Martin (experienced WeCo member, in person)

- 12.45 - 13.45 Lunch, tour of the premises
- 14.00 - 14.30 Meeting with NIAS Communications and Programming Staff (Rachida Azough, Klaartje Laan, Merlijn Olzon)
- 14.30 - 15.00 Committee meeting
- 15.00 - 15.45 Meeting with Management Team (Jan Willem Duyvendak, Marlous Willemsen)
- 16.00 - 17.30 Committee meeting
- 17.30 - 18.30 Presentation of preliminary results, with drinks and a bite

## Appendix III: Funding

Table E2: Human Capacity in FTE								
	Year 5	Year 4	Year 3	Year 2	Year 1	Current Year		Average
<b>Total research staff</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-		
Support staff (fte)	6,8	6,6	6,5	6,4	8,7	7,8		7,13
Visiting fellows (fte)		28,75	29,58	22,92	20,83	23,75		25,17
<b>Total Staff</b>		<b>35,35</b>	<b>36,08</b>	<b>29,32</b>	<b>29,53</b>	<b>31,55</b>		<b>32,37</b>

Table E3: Funding per CALENDAR Year; Current Year forecasted												
	Year 5		Year 4		Year 3		Year 2		Year 1		Current Year	
Direct Funding in K	2.372	91%	2.436	94%	2.463	93%	2.677	91%	2.792	87%	2.906	89%
Research Grants in K							18	1%	16	1%		
Contract Research in K	38	2%										
Partnership Funding in K	132	5%	122	5%	102	4%	152	5%	243	8%	228	7%
Other in K	67	3%	38	2%	73	3%	107	4%	168	5%	135	4%
<b>Total Funding in K</b>	<b>2.609</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>2.596</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>2.638</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>2.954</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>3.219</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>3.269</b>	<b>100%</b>
Expenditure in K												
Personnel Costs in K	816	30%	847	32%	886	33%	965	35%	1.345	38%	1.262	36%
Stipends and Replacement Fees in K	624	23%	759	29%	698	26%	638	23%	701	20%	633	18%
Material Costs in K												
Other Costs in K	1.281	47%	1.046	39%	1.080	41%	1.163	42%	1.518	43%	1.571	45%
<b>Total Expenditure in K</b>	<b>2.721</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>2.652</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>2.664</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>2.766</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>3.564</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>3.466</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Result in K</b>	<b>-112</b>		<b>-56</b>		<b>-26</b>		<b>188</b>		<b>-345</b>		<b>-197</b>	