



K O N I N K L I J K E N E D E R L A N D S E
A K A D E M I E V A N W E T E N S C H A P P E N

**POSITION OF THE BOARD OF THE ROYAL NETHERLANDS
ACADEMY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES (KNAW) REGARDING THE
2018 SEP EVALUATION OF THE KNAW HUMANITIES CLUSTER
INSTITUTES**

- **THE MEERTENS INSTITUTE**
- **THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL HISTORY (IISH)**
- **HUYGENS INSTITUTE FOR THE HISTORY OF THE NETHERLANDS (HUYGENS ING)**

It is a pleasure for the board and management of the KNAW to respond to the reports of the three assessment committees that visited the KNAW Humanities Cluster institutes in March 2018. The board would like to thank the members of the committees for their extensive work; it is especially grateful to prof. Hovy, who chaired the assessment of all three institutes in the cluster. In formulating its position with regard to the assessment reports, the board has taken into account the responses of the management of the institutes and of their scientific advisory boards.

For all three institutes, the assessments encompassed a timeframe that marked a transition towards more intensive collaboration within the Humanities Cluster; hence we respond to all three assessment reports in one single position paper. The board considers the evaluations provided by the committees to be fair and constructive assessments of three institutes in a collective transition process. The board considers the recommendations of the committees as strong support for the strategy that is currently implemented, and acknowledges that in certain areas further steps need to be taken. The board will actively support all three institutes in their ongoing commitment to this strategy and all specific recommendations; it will monitor and discuss the progress during the bi-annual meetings with the institutes. This position paper initially focusses on the implications of the reports for the Humanities Cluster as a whole. Next, it comments on the three individual institutes, addressing the recommendations of the committees in the order in which they appear in the reports.

1 THE ADVANTAGES OF OPERATING IN THE HUMANITIES CLUSTER

All three committees recommended that the institutes should make optimal use of the opportunities offered by the cluster.

The KNAW board gratefully acknowledges the collective conclusion of the three committees that forming a cluster on history, language and culture with an emphasis on digital humanities was a strong strategic decision. The board will therefore continue and reinforce its current strategy towards strengthening the Humanities Cluster.

During the assessment period, the focus has been on establishing the material and organisational preconditions for a successful cluster. First steps have recently been taken to further develop the cluster's research profile by means of joint research on Dutch identity in an international perspective and the Digital Humanities Lab. As highlighted by the three committees, the cluster has in certain respects already successfully claimed a position at the forefront of developments in the digital humanities field, but it takes time and perseverance for the results of all these investments to fully materialise.

Supported by the three assessment reports, the KNAW board and the Humanities Cluster management will continue to prioritise the development of digital tools that benefit or even transform traditional humanities research, as well as joint thematic research on Dutch history, language and culture. This requires a clearly articulated vision on innovations in the humanities by the cluster's leadership. This strategy will also be guiding in the recruitment of new scientific staff. In anticipation of the fact that a large number of researchers will retire in the years to come, the Meertens Institute and Huygens ING recently submitted a request for 'personnel tiling', inspired by a similar policy at IISH. The board takes a

constructive position in this discussion, based on the premise that a strategic investment in additional staff should sharpen the profile of the entire cluster.

Taken together, the KNAW board envisions that the Humanities Cluster will develop into an increasingly coherent organisation that operates with a shared vision. The board intends to reinforce this overall policy of increased collaboration while recognising the importance of established identities. The board reads these three reports together as a strong endorsement of its policy to help the Humanities Cluster advance, not just its own research, relevance and viability, but the humanities more generally.

2 THE MEERTENS INSTITUTE

Research quality: staff composition and proposal submission

The committee has evaluated the research of the Meertens Institute as “excellent, and in some cases even world-leading” (p. 10). The committee assessed the overall research quality to be ‘very good’ and identified two main points for improvement.

The board is pleased with this appreciation of the Meertens Institute’s research. With the committee, the KNAW board acknowledges that the size of the research group is small compared to that of the support staff and that the Meertens Institute would benefit from more mid-career researchers. For this reason, the board has already awarded the institute additional funding for a mid-level post, on top of the midcareer and tenure track hires that have recently been made. As discussed above, the Meertens Institute aims to hire new research staff before older researchers retire (‘personnel tiling’). As grant writing capacities will be one of the main criteria in the selection procedure, this strategic investment will also offer opportunities for implementing the committee’s recommendation to boost funding efforts and awareness. The board encourages the management to continue the initiatives it has already taken to improve the institute’s grant writing culture.

Relevance to society: the Meertens Institute as a hub for students and scholars

The committee noted that the Meertens Institute has a strong impact, but suggested that more can be done, hence the overall assessment of the relevance to society as ‘very good’. The committee recommended expanding the institute’s outreach efforts with activities aimed at high school or undergraduate students and by hosting (inter)national visitors.

The Meertens Institute is already involved in several high school projects. The KNAW board feels that one of the added values of its research institutes is their roles as vibrant hubs, not only for (high school) students, but for the academic world and society at large. The board agrees with the suggestion of the management that intensifying this particular means of knowledge utilisation should be connected to a broader discussion on the educational role of the KNAW institutes in general.

Viability: transparency and flagship projects

The committee rated the viability of the Meertens Institute ‘very good’ and offered two main recommendations for further improvement.

The KNAW board agrees that, in the middle of the current transition of the institute, concerns and misunderstandings among the staff should be avoided as much as possible. The board supports the management’s commitment to transparency during these dynamic times and invites it to develop an internal communication plan with regard to the Humanities Cluster, in coordination with its two sister institutes. The board also sees the benefits of the recommendation to launch a number of flagship projects to flesh out the institute’s vision on digital humanities and establish itself as a role model for the field. As the management points out, the Meertens Institute has already hosted several innovative and high-impact digital humanities projects. In line with the scientific advisory board, the KNAW board therefore concludes that the institute’s track record warrants confidence in its future as a leading digital humanities force.

PhD training: larger number of PhD’s

The committee observed that the number of PhD students at the Meertens Institute is lower than optimal.

The KNAW board agrees and encourages the management to increase the number of PhD’s employed by the institute. The board sees a lively PhD community as indispensable for the institute’s role as an incubator for talent and ideas. Like the scientific advisory board, the KNAW board maintains that implementing two of the committee’s other recommendations will contribute to increasing the number of

PhD students: hiring more mid-career researchers with a proven ability to obtain external funds, and creating a pro-active grant writing culture in general.

3 THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL HISTORY (IISH)

Research quality: a key global player

The committee assessed the research quality of the IISH as 'excellent'. According to the committee, the IISH stands out internationally because its methodology to interpret data in terms of typologies of characteristics enables it "to do large-scale – even bold – comparisons across quite disparate areas" (p. 10).

Given the committee's finding that the new focus of the institute convincingly builds on the reputation developed during the previous review period, the KNAW board supports the management in its intention to further strengthen the link between labour relations and inequality, as stated in its response.

Collections quality: significant and well-run

The committee assessed the quality of the IISH collections to be 'very good' because of the significance of their content and its professional maintenance. According to the committee, there has been "excellent progress" (p. 11) with regard to the collections in recent years.

The KNAW board is pleased that recent investments and efforts towards this aim are paying off. The KNAW board views the committee's assessment as a confirmation that the current course should be continued and will further contribute to an excellent collections department.

Relevance to society (research): a clearer strategy for outreach by more researchers

The committee assessed the thematic relevance of IISH research to be "extremely high" (p. 11) and the number and range of outreach activities to be impressive. It assessed the overall relevance to society of the research as 'very good', and identified two related points for improvement: encouraging more researchers to engage in outreach and developing a clearer strategy for enhancing societal impact.

Both the KNAW board and the IISH management agree with these recommendations. The board therefore invites the management to make its commitment to valorisation concrete by working out its impact strategy in line with the overall research strategy.

Relevance to society (collections): greater online outreach

The committee considered the IISH collections to be "extremely relevant" (p. 12) but indicated that more can be done, hence the overall assessment of the collections' relevance to society as 'very good'. The committee advised the institute to make more and better use of the possibilities offered by online outreach.

The KNAW board encourages the management to explicitly include online outreach in its new impact strategy. Like the committee, the board is convinced that a greater online presence will lead to an increased societal interest in the IISH collections.

Viability: clearer collections guidelines

The committee concluded that the viability of the IISH has improved during the review period, due to adjustments of the strategy and plans to rejuvenate and diversify the staff. The committee observed that morale and satisfaction among the staff is high. It also noted that the shift to digitisation and digital-born archives has strengthened IISH's (inter)national position as a heritage institution. The committee considered the overall viability of the institute to be 'very good' as it felt that the challenges brought by this shift call for clearer collection acquisition guidelines.

The KNAW board and IISH management acknowledge that rapid technological developments require ongoing reflection on collection composition and acquisition. The board has already provided a substantial financial impulse to strengthen digital archiving; it invites the management to refine its collections policy along the lines of the committee's suggestion. A more refined plan for dealing with digital material will be of substantial use to the Humanities Cluster as a whole.

4 HUYGENS INSTITUTE FOR THE HISTORY OF THE NETHERLANDS (HUYGENS ING)

Research quality: a clearer profile and better method for quality evaluation

The committee considered the overall research quality of the institute to be 'very good' and identified two main points for improvement. It concluded that the heterogeneity of the research groups stands in the way of

a clearer profile and strategy. The committee also recommended that the institute develops a more fine-grained method for evaluating the quality of its output.

The KNAW board is pleased with the committee's observation that Huygens ING "has produced excellent scholarly work" (p. 10). Like the management, the board acknowledges that the research profile of the institute still is heterogeneous. It accepts, however, that reducing this heterogeneity requires time and careful planning. The management should continue the internal debate it has started on this issue and bring more focus to the research strategy whenever opportunities arise. In line with current developments in the humanities at large, the committee suggested to work on improving a larger number of research output targets. The board agrees with the management that not all targets can be reached simultaneously and supports the choice to prioritise more proposals and high-quality publications, since those will provide most leverage for other output indicators.

Relevance to society: develop an outreach strategy

The committee observed that Huygens ING is in a unique position to draw societal interest and acknowledged that many outreach activities are indeed being undertaken. The committee also indicated that a coherent strategy to plan and budget for outreach is lacking; hence the assessment of the relevance to society as 'good'. The KNAW board confirms Huygens ING's unique position, but emphasises that the research performed at Huygens ING may not lend itself as easily to valorisation as other types of research. Nevertheless, the board agrees that the institute has not reached its full impact potential. The board thus invites the management to bring more focus to its outreach efforts, in addition to the (online) communication steps it has already taken. The board supports the management in its decision to base this valorisation strategy on the research strategy.

Viability: IT as research and 'personnel tiling'

In the view of the committee, Huygens ING can make an "outstanding contribution" (p. 13) to research and society given the right conditions. The committee assessed the current viability of the institute as 'very good' and offered two main recommendations. According to the committee, "[o]ne of Huygens ING's outstanding qualities is the deeply theorised co-construction of the research workspace" (p. 13) by both domain researchers and IT specialists. It suggested promoting this model of co-development. The committee also recommended improving the institute's viability by means of 'personnel tiling'.

The KNAW board encourages the management to use the strength of the Huygens ING approach of co-development as an important element in sharpening its research profile. Articulating this model to clarify how software development projects indeed represent research and sharing these insights with others, most notably within the Humanities Cluster, could significantly advance the field of digital humanities in general. The second recommendation was addressed above and will be implemented at short notice.

PhD training: outstanding intervision

The committee expressed approval for the regular intervision meetings with PhD's and other temporary staff on topics such as career planning and publishing strategies. As the committee suggested, this could serve as a model for the Humanities Cluster as a whole.

The board invites the management to share its experiences with intervision with its sister institutes and notes that this could further promote collaboration within the Humanities Cluster.

Amsterdam, July 2018