

Reaction from the IISG to the assessment report

The IISH went through a difficult period around 2010. The institute was confronted with a large financial shortfall. Several renowned researchers left and not all incoming collections could be processed. In 2011, the Institute was visited by an evaluation committee that expressed praise for the performance of the research group and stressed the importance of the collection, but made critical comments regarding the management. At the end of 2012, there was a management change, followed by a reorganisation in 2013.

From that moment on, the staff of the Institute have worked very hard on its recovery. The evaluation in 2018 was a target in that respect. Over the last few years, we always considered the 2018 evaluation as an important benchmark for our progress and plans. We asked the KNAW to assemble a committee including researchers as well as collection specialists. In our self-assessment, we tried to outline a picture that was as honest and complete as possible.

We found the evaluation enlightening and useful. The committee took the approach that it wanted to help us make further improvements. The site visit took place in a positive atmosphere and was inspiring. We value the committee's recommendations, which will form the guidelines for an amended version of our strategic plan for 2018-2023. We are very grateful to the committee members for the time they took to familiarise themselves with our work and to share their wisdom with us.

Looking at the evaluation report, what probably pleases us most is the observation that the morale among the workforce is high and that staff are working with 'enthusiasm and eagerness' in 'what appears to be a happy work environment'. After all, this is a necessary condition for success; it is unlikely that excellent results can be achieved without the enthusiasm and dedication of the employees. However, a happy work environment does not arise spontaneously. We will therefore need to continue to invest in a sound working environment, including by aiming to diversify our workforce (recommendation 5).

What we consider as extraordinarily important, is that the committee emphasises the intrinsic social value of our collections as well as our research programme: the collection is 'extremely relevant to society' and 'the thematic relevance [of research] is extremely high'. This powerful justification of why we exist forms an inspiring basis that we can build on. We also agree with the committee that we can do more to fully realise the potential social impact of our research and our collections (recommendations 2 and 3). In our strategy for the period 2018-2023, this action point is given top priority.

Also encouraging is the recognition of our research group as a 'key global player', and that the quality of our research was rated as 'excellent'. In the self-assessment, we announced that we intend to further strengthen the link between labour relations and economic and social inequality in the subsequent period. We are pleased that the committee condones this reorientation. The recommendation (4) 'to seek more support for proposal writing activities' has already been followed up. The KNAW HuC has entered into an agreement with IXA, the grant office of the University of Amsterdam. The support of the IXA employees

is more than adequate. Furthermore, the IISH has already been quite successful in obtaining grants without the support of IXA: in the period of 2012-2017, we were awarded over 10 million euros. Approximately half of our research staff consists of PhD students and postdoc researchers funded by external grants. The committee's recommendation to establish a 'minimum' - or an optimal - number of PhD students working in the Institute (recommendation 7) will be followed.

In addition, the committee found that the IISH 'has made excellent progress in collections and concomitant international visibility'. We consider this as a major compliment for our Collections Department. The fact that collections are now considered as 'clearly a coherent, close-knit, and very-well run activity' is the result of hard work and the creative use of scarce resources. A good organisation is one of the conditions to become an international trailblazer in collection management, so the finding that this basis is currently in place is satisfying. The IISH is grateful for the support the KNAW has given in order to strengthen the Collections Department with respect to digital archiving. It is notable that the committee recognized the importance of this.

The committee's recommendation that developing and using new technology must continue to go hand in hand with a coherent vision for the future and transparent guidelines for acquiring collections (recommendation 1) has definitely been taken on board. We acknowledge the rapid pace of developments in society and technology, demanding constant refocusing. It is indeed necessary for us to perform continual self-reflection and regular updates to our collection plan.

We have high expectations of our collaboration with the Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands and the Meertens Institute in the KNAW Humanities Cluster. In order to take the lead in digital humanities, digital infrastructure, digital data and collection management, it is essential that we organise these activities together. The same applies to financial management and the shared service centre, which started in October 2016. In the years to come this will develop into an even more effective and professional source of advice and support. The committee encourages the collaboration in the HuC and recommends that the IISH 'visibly, energetically, and publicly indicates its participation and central role in the cluster'. We will definitely do so.

We also agree with the 'strong recommendation [...] that a distinct entity of 'IISH' be maintained' and that 'An independent 'brand' is indispensable for IISH's type of collection building, as well as for the reputation of its internationally-recognized research group' (recommendation 6). The retention of our identity and of our global reputation is indeed an essential condition to remain successful in our domain.

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