

# Reaction to the Assessment Report Meertens Institute 2012-2017

Management team, Meertens Institute

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## Preamble

In this document the KNAW Meertens Institute voices its reaction to the findings and recommendations of an international peer review of the Meertens Institute carried out on March 12 and 13, 2018, as voiced in the *Assessment Report Meertens Institute Peer Review 2012-2017* (April 2018). The peer review committee, appointed by the Board of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences (KNAW), was chaired by prof. Eduard Hovy, with members profs. Angela Ralli, Tine Damsholt, Walter Daelemans, and Oskar Verkaaik (not present at the site visit due to illness), with secretarial support from Frans van Steijn.

The assessment was based on a self-assessment report provided by the Meertens Institute, additional documentation, and two days of meetings with the staff and students of the institute. The report by the committee is both prospective and retrospective and contains several recommendations to the Meertens Institute and the KNAW Board.

The Meertens Institute thanks all members of the peer review committee for sharing their expert views in the discussions during the site visit and in the report.

In this document we respond to the assessment and recommendations made by the committee. We address the three SEP categories separately, just as how the committee divided their assessment: Research quality, Relevance to society, and Viability. We close with an outlook to the future.

## Research Quality

The committee states that the Meertens Institute, although producing excellent (and in some cases even world-leading) research, is not able to live up to its mandate to cover all of Dutch language and culture due to its small size. Leaving aside the question which institute size would cover these broad topics, size is necessarily rooted in funding. Funding of the institute comes in mainly two streams: first, the lump-sum funding that is more or less stable; second, external

funds. We briefly address both issues as the committee makes remarks and recommendations on both.

The lump-sum funding is more or less fixed, while price and wage indexation are not compensated as a rule. Therefore, the lump sum is, relatively speaking, a reducing quantity. The foreseeable factor by which budget can be freed and used for hiring is when senior staff retires. Due to the demography of the staff, by 2028 80% of the current senior staff will have retired, but the first retirements are in 2022. Therefore, the 2018-2022 period is crucial for the institute to make progress on rejuvenating the staff through means beyond the lump sum. We do not consider reducing the size of the institute through drastic budget cuts and/or a reorganization a viable option. Instead, we agree with the evaluation committee that there is a need for temporary financial aid to hire at least a mid-career researcher and one other researcher or technical assistant; the KNAW has acknowledged this and has awarded the institute funding for these posts. We also note that the institute hired mid-career researcher prof. Marjo van Koppen in 2017; she shares her time with Utrecht University (50%-50%); and that in the past four years we created tenure track positions for three researchers (Balkenhol, Elpers, and Karsdorp) to mitigate the lack of early mid-career researchers. We think that with a total of 4.5 fte post-doctoral, tenure track and mid-career researchers, we are already on our way to a good balance in the institute with its 15.4 fte total research staff (in 2017); the new posts will move us further in the right direction.

We acknowledge that external funding, the second funding stream, has been relatively low in the evaluated 2012-2017 period. Funding for PhD students, for example, has not been acquired for a number of years, which has led to a small PhD student contingent at the end of the evaluation period. The institute is determined to follow the enthusiastic encouragements of the evaluation committee, stepping up even more the efforts to submit high-quality applications. Alternatives to NWO funding should be explored; as the committee remarks; European funding is an obvious route. Applications could possibly be more cross-disciplinary. External researchers who would fit well with the institute's mission and mandate could be encouraged to apply for personal funding with the Meertens Institute as host. The on-campus subsidy advisor IXA has been contracted by the KNAW Humanities Cluster in 2017, and has started to boost the awareness of funding opportunities with researchers, as well as coach these researchers through the application process. Perhaps most importantly, the institute is stimulating a culture in which researchers feel encouraged to think about and spend time on applications. For instance, at the monthly plenary research meeting, funding options, application ideas and submitted applications are mentioned and discussed.

Aside from the PhD students employed at the institute, over the years many other PhD students have been supervised by Meertens Institute staff members while being employed at their respective universities; much of these institute-related successes have been invisible in the institute's statistics, as have other university activities carried out by staff members. To enlarge the PhD student population, a guaranteed vitalization booster, the institute will strive for hosting also these PhD students in the institute for at least part of their project, on the basis of a double

(or guest) affiliation. It is the joint responsibility of the staff member, the institute and the involved university to come to a suitable agreement, which, aside from practical considerations such as geographical distance, should generally be unproblematic.

## Relevance to Society

The committee remarks that the institute has a strong impact through its public role and its communications to a broader audience. Yet, more can be done. One example the committee gives is making use of the neutral role between the universities with respect to high school and undergraduate students. We agree that education is an important area where the institute has perhaps not fully explored its full potential; neither have other KNAW institutes towards these target groups. The institute has been mostly visible in high-school education through online publications aimed at the target audience, such as the *Neerlandistiek voor de klas* (Dutch language and culture in the classroom) initiative, a series of blogs targeted at high-school teachers, and TLPST, a newsletter targeted at the first three years of high school education in Dutch language. We do have a long tradition of bringing individual students to the institute; we host many university undergraduate students as interns on a continuous basis. The recommendation of the committee, in our view, calls for a KNAW-wide discussion of boosting the role of its institutes in bringing academic research to high schools (and vice versa), making use of their neutral role, adding to KNAW's other efforts in this direction, such as the *KNAW Onderwijsprijs*.

## Viability

The institute takes to heart the committee's advice to avoid unnecessary fracture lines with the services and staff that during most of the evaluation period were employees of the institute. Centralization has benefits, such as efficiency (the services of the KNAW Humanities Cluster are expected to reduce their overhead costs by scaling, control, and efficiency measures), but they may have costs as well. It is the institute's task, especially that of its director and the management team, to strive for transparency and strong and positive communication lines with the 'services', realizing how strongly connected they are to the institute's mission and traditions.

The committee notes a lack of vision for how digital humanities could be used in a variety of projects in the institute. The committee recommends to plan two or three flagship cross-disciplinary and digitally-based projects that illustrate various ways of fusing old and new (digital) research paradigms. We agree heartily; in the past six years, the Meertens Institute hosted eye-catching digital humanities projects that connected old and new research paradigms and made considerable waves. We mention *Tunes & Tales* (KNAW Computational Humanities), *WITCHCRAFT*, and *FACT* (both NWO CATCH). These projects produced four PhD theses of which two were rated 'cum laude' (Folger Karsdorp, *Tunes & Tales*; Dong Nguyen, *FACT*) at their respective universities. These studies contributed significantly to the young fields of computational musicology, computational folk narrative and computational sociolinguistics,

showing cross-disciplinary 'best of both worlds'-strength. This line of research continues with the work of current tenure-track post-doc Folgert Karsdorp and the ISEBEL project (Digging Into Data), started in 2017.

We feel encouraged by the committee to continue along these lines. In many of the current applications (in review, submitted or in preparation), significant portions of the projects employ digital humanities tools and methods. Since 2018 we operate closely together with the KNAW HuC Digital Humanities Lab, the KNAW HuC Digital Infrastructure group and our other HuC partners, other KNAW institutes and universities. The funding of the joint CLARIAH-PLUS infrastructure program solidifies this collaborative infrastructure even more for the coming years, making it increasingly easier to progressively 'stand on the shoulders of giants'.

## Closing remarks

The institute went through more than one significant change in the last two years of the evaluation period. In the most recent year, 2017, the new director, the recent move, and the new organization of the KNAW Humanities Cluster influenced and initiated many subsequent changes. Some do not have immediate effects, and need time to evolve. One change, the installment of a broad management team with a good representation of the research staff, has made the governance of the institute more transparent, and managing the institute a shared goal.

The institute is grateful for the support that the board of the KNAW has shown and given, e.g. through financial impulses that have helped us boost and rejuvenate our staff. The institute is happy with the evaluation committee's re-affirmation of its impact and importance, provided that we rejuvenate and increase the staff. With this support and with all above-mentioned efforts, we expect to see measurable effects in increased funding within the next three years, at the midterm review of 2021. While the senior staff in this period will not change, we expect the (early) mid-career staff to increase in numbers, as well as the number of PhD students on the institute's premises. We expect the Digital Humanities Lab, though not part of the institute, to have a catalyst role in attracting funding for projects with a digital humanities component. In general, the institute strives to be a magnet for talent, and believes it can do this by its unique cross-disciplinary mix of paradigms and methods, by its unique collections and databases, and by its biggest asset, the standing of its individual researchers.



