

## **Response to the Peer Review Report (research assessment 2012-2017) of the Netherlands Institute of Ecology (NIOO) by The Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) of NIOO, June 2018**

### **General**

The Scientific Advisory Board is happy to see that NIOO is considered to be an international centre of excellence in all its areas of research. In general, the main recommendations of the Review panel are in line with the recommendations and discussions the SAB already had in the interactions with NIOO. Below we give our responses to the main recommendations.

### **Main recommendations:**

- (1) *“it is recommended that NIOO performs an advanced benchmark analysis, comparing itself to similar institutes around the world and determining its unique selling point compared to these institutes. It is important to identify the characteristics that make NIOO a unique player”*

**Response:** The SAB agrees with some elements of this. In particular, the SAB agrees that it is important that NIOO identifies appropriate benchmarks (though some discussion is needed as to whether the appropriate benchmarks should be research institutes only, or include University departments), otherwise statements of excellence may be too subjective (e.g. how should one interpret a ‘mean normalised citation score of 1.78’?). However, we would emphasise a ‘light touch’ approach to this, as otherwise the pursuit of comparative success may become a goal in itself. It is of the utmost importance that NIOO clearly identifies the characteristics that make it THE Netherlands Institute of Ecology.

- (2) *“The committee recommends safeguarding the institute’s emphasis on basic science as this is a key component of the institute’s uniqueness. The committee encourages NIOO to lead novel research fields and pursue high-risk, high-gain projects, and to be thematically open-minded when it comes to recruiting new NIOO staff members.”*

**Response:** The SAB agrees with this general recommendation, and considers that the recent development of seven themes, which provide one way to increase flexibility in the future, should be encouraged and further developed.

- (3) *“However, the institute’s activities to stimulate and facilitate knowledge utilisation appear to be somewhat ad hoc. These activities should be fuelled by a clear **vision** on the institute’s strategic relevance to society.”*

**Response:** The SAB agrees with this general recommendation and considers that the specific recommendations are sensible, with the exception of the suggestion of a parallel Societal Relevance Advisory Board, since this may create potential for at best non-aligned, or at worst, conflicting, advice. An alternative would be to incorporate an additional external member or two of the SAB with the remit to address the strategy for societal relevance. A strategic approach should still enable sufficient flexibility to enable the integration of novel research fields.

(4) *“Although the committee considers the departmental structure somewhat rigid and outdated, the structure of departments, cross-departmental themes, and research translation units appears to work well for NIOO.”*

**Response:** The question of future structure has been at the heart of recent discussions between the SAB and NIOO, in particular with respect to the relationship between departments and themes. We anticipate that this relationship will evolve over the next few years, particularly with senior recruitments imminent and the development of the cross-departmental themes. The SAB certainly sees it as one of its main tasks for the coming years to advise further on this.

(5) *“The committee recommends increasing the importance of the themes in the future, so that they can become mature interdisciplinary cross-overs in the departmental organisation structure.”*

**Response:** The SAB endorses the main thrust of this recommendation with the caveat that some themes are not yet mature enough to be clear that they can form a viable part of an organisation structure.

(6) *“The committee urges the KNAW to start the formal search for a new Director as soon as possible, preferably at least two years in advance”*

and

(7) *“The committee recommends the institute to immediately start the formal search for her [Prof Ellen van Donk’s] successor. We recommend NIOO be open-minded regarding the expertise of potential candidates and allow new research areas to be brought into the institute with a high-profile candidate.”*

**Response:** The SAB endorses these recommendations.

(8) *“In general, the committee agrees that the institute’s personal planning strategy seems to be rather rigid. For instance, the distribution of staff members over the departments is rather fixed at present. The institute could be more flexible and appoint on the basis of scientific excellence rather than specific expertise when vacancies arise.”*

**Response:** The SAB endorses this recommendation

(9) *“The committee anticipates that a bioinformatics facility consisting of only two people will be insufficient in the future... as the field of ecology is rapidly becoming more data-intensive, the committee expects that the institute will need to extend the capacity of the bioinformatics unit in the future.”*

**Response:** The SAB endorses these this recommendation

(10) *“NIOO should appoint a grant support officer (i.e., a research funding facilitator with ecological knowledge) devoted to assisting NIOO scientists in the preparation of large research grant applications.”*

**Response:** The SAB endorses this approach

(11) *“The committee suggests that NIOO establishes a solidarity funding principle, where senior scientists with large strategic grants or large personal grants (ERC, VICI) allocate a percentage of their resources to the strategic funding budget”*

**Response:** The SAB endorses this recommendation

*June 2018*

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