

Reaction on the SEP evaluation 2018 by DANS

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1. General

DANS is very happy with the positive evaluation of the institute. We welcome the three “very good” scores we received for overall quality of our services (and research), relevance to society and research community, and viability, and took notice of the comment by the evaluation committee that we may value these even higher than in the previous evaluation, since the criteria have become stricter.

We would like to express our appreciation for the work that the committee did, who seemed to be excellently informed and prepared, and who posed very relevant and penetrating questions during the site visit. We think they did their job with great and critical professionalism, and yet in a pleasant and open atmosphere. We did our best to show them all nooks and crannies of the institute, and did not hide our own doubts or self-perceived weaknesses.

One of the things we are proud of, is the remark about the DANS staff, which is characterized as “knowledgeable, dedicated and skilled”. Something similar was said in the previous evaluation, so we take this as an asset to cherish. There are many more compliments in the report like those on the professionalism of our organization in terms of time, project and financial management. We indeed think that the institute runs fairly smoothly, thanks both to the motivated staff and the business processes that are tailor-made for the organization, and which we adapt with flexibility when we think that is needed.

There are three themes in the evaluation report that drew our special attention: the position of the users, the scope of the DANS ambitions in terms of disciplines, and our organizational position as an institute of both KNAW and NWO.

2. The user perspective

Concerning the user perspective, this is mentioned on page 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, and in recommendations 4 and 7. The points made are:

- *It is necessary that DANS turns more towards the user perspective in the upcoming years, that is, towards those who want to (re)use data and information that has already been uploaded to DANS (page 8).*
- *In further developing the instruments the co-creating with users might be advisable. The committee recommends that the user perspective is taken into consideration more strongly in the future. The viewpoint of data consumers could provide DANS with valuable information about possible improvements in all of its core services. While there is an Advisory Board for DataverseNL and NARCIS, there is none for EASY. The committee recommends that it implements a similar sounding board for this product, which could also advise on the establishment of communities of users of specific data collections (page 11).*
- *Establishing communities of (potential) users of specific collections could add value to the collections. The vast collection on Archeology is currently underutilized and the discipline could profit from systematic meta-analyses of families of records in the depot. Some of the repeated surveys in the social sciences are downloaded frequently and consistently by registered users and bringing these users into contact might stimulate second order learning about the data (page 11).*
- *DANS has limited information on its data users. The committee advises to identify current users and to develop means for identifying new potential users. The impact of the provided data will hopefully soon be measurable by automatic means if data citations with persistent identifiers become state of the art. DANS should now start with developing tools for measuring that (page 12).*
- *The user perspective is also an area for further improvement. The committee recommends DANS to link up more with users of data and the user perspective (page 13).*

We do take these points, and see opportunities for improvement. Setting up a sounding board for the EASY archive was already being considered, and we will involve users more in this respect. The evaluation committee does not mention here that the existing Scientific Advisory Board traditionally pays special attention to this core archival service of DANS, whereas specific sounding boards focus on NARCIS and DataverseNL, services that were added later in time.

The demands of the end users are incredibly diverse if we are talking about data re-use, and it is impossible to do justice to the great variety of user communities directly without making selections. We do organize workshops with specific user communities, and visit existing research conferences to promote DANS. To mention a few: we organize an annual European Social Survey symposium, organize workshops of CBS-data users, collaborate with researchers in the context of ODISSEI, have held meetings with social scientists and oral historians on qualitative interviews, had sessions with linguists, extensively worked with users of census data, and so on. We participate and contribute regularly to conferences on computing and archaeology, digital humanities, social science history, religious studies, and more. Last year we even organized a workshop together with NIOO for young researchers in ecology and evolutionary biology, which showed interesting crossovers with humanities and social sciences. And early this year DANS was awarded (in a competition) to organize a prestigious workshop by the European Research Data Alliance (RDA) with top-scientists from a variety of disciplines to discuss their data requirements. And on the first day of spring 2018 we organized a very successful open day on open science, visited by about 100 enthusiastic young researchers. On top of this, we regularly organize webinars and provide training courses on data management (online and in person), provide guest lectures at universities. So, we do think we already spend considerable effort in listening to and interacting with users, and will even increase our efforts. But this list also makes it clear that there are limitations here.

Furthermore, there is a clear tendency at the universities to provide certain data services, often performed by the university library (sometimes by a newly created data management support office). Here a new group of users has come into being: the data librarians and other intermediaries at the universities, whom we also service with among other things, a highly successful training course and other back-office services (such as DataverseNL). This is in line with the remark in the evaluation report on page 9: “A shift towards support in data management and curation rather than data archiving as such provides more added value to researchers from both the SSH and other communities (page 9)”. We therefore also fully support the observation in the report “DANS should continue to communicate and explain its own position to key stakeholders in the near future. The panel advises that this is part of efforts to increase presence and visibility of DANS at universities and to strengthen networks with key stakeholders (universities, data users, data providers, funding organizations and other promoters of Open Science” (page 9) and “DANS has an important role in guiding researchers. The panel believes that the institute could get even more out of this if it would increase its presence and visibility amongst deciders and users at the different university levels” (page 12).

We do take it that there is always more to learn about one’s customers. In our new research & innovation policy, we focus more on analytics of the use and users of our services, and have hired a staff member with a special task to mine and analyze the information on the users we already possess in our logs.

3. The scope of the DANS ambitions in terms of disciplines and national boundaries

The second point that struck us and which is mentioned in various places is about the scope of our ambitions. The report formulates it in different ways, especially in section 4.1 on page 8, and in recommendation 1:

- *There might be opportunities to also expand other services and expertise, like DataverseNL services to a broader scientific community, for instance into the human life sciences. Also, active collaboration and knowledge exchange with other fields than SSH remains important.*
- *The committee recommends that DANS further develops and continues to guard this strong home base [in the SSH domain]. DANS should identify its key stakeholders in this community, strengthen its network here and make sure that stakeholders are always the starting point of DANS’s activities.*
- *The strengthening of activities in the SSH domain does not necessarily exclude other national and international activities.*

- *The first recommendation is about the role of DANS in the SSH domain. The committee recommend that DANS further develops and continues to guard DANS's strong home base in this domain. This can be done by identifying key stakeholders in this community, strengthening the network here and by making sure that stakeholders are always the starting point of DANS's activities (recommendation 1, page 15).*

We read this as “concentrate on your core target group, and be careful when expanding beyond that”. This is exactly how we have been operating in the past few years: expanding our activities to other domains in small steps, always driven by demand, taking good care whether the expansion was within our field of expertise, and whether it was financially sound. It is our intention to continue this prudent approach, and to make it more explicit in our mission.

DANS will never forsake its origins in the humanities and social sciences, nor our primary task for Dutch scholarship and science. Nevertheless, we think there are good arguments to broaden our scope to other disciplines, and this even with an international outlook. The argument is simply that if more data is available and can be found at DANS, it is a more attractive party for researchers. It may even be that if we do not go that direction, private companies such as Elsevier, Springer and figshare will soon dominate the data world and marginalize the local and national public data archives and repositories. If we collectively find this a good thing, I also have peace with it, but the scientific world runs the risk to get into a bitter struggle with large data companies (now publishers, who do not bother about national boundaries) in 10 or 20 years, as there are now battles for Open Access.

The trend of the data business to internationalize is undeniable. This is why the first strategic priority that DANS formulated back in 2015 is: “DANS forms a leading building block in national and international data provision”. We actively pursued participation in European and world-wide data infrastructures. We also built liaisons with international repositories to safeguard public access to public data by long-term archiving the content from their data services, and we are forging more of such partnerships.

If we continue to internationalize, we will in a sense compete with very large parties. Is that not an impossible task? We do not think so, at least not as long as Open Science remains a policy priority. Because DANS can promise things that a private company cannot promise. After all, it is precisely for this reason that Elsevier has signed a contract with DANS for the archiving of their Mendeley Data repository. Moreover, the “harvesting” of metadata from international sources is no more difficult than obtaining comparable Dutch information. We are already working hard to offer DataverseNL-type services via CESSDA (and hopefully also via DARIAH and other ERICs) on a European level. And moreover: DANS does not do these things alone, but often in larger, international coalitions (which will gradually become part of the European Open Science Cloud). Also, by internationalizing and expanding in a disciplinary way, DANS and the reuse of the data that we make accessible will become more attractive to Dutch researchers, also in the SSH domain.

Our focus will be on the long-tail of data: that is the data for which it pays to store it in central repositories. It is not effective to move the vast quantities from Big Data facilities to other locations: here it is better to build archival properties into these facilities (which was one of the motives for formulating the Data Seal of Approval, originally a DANS invention, now under the new brand of the Core Trust Seal the world leading certification system for research data repositories). A new slogan for DANS we are contemplating is “DANS, Big in Small Data”.

4. Organizational position as an institute of both KNAW and NWO.

DANS has recently written a separate position paper on this subject. We will not attempt to summarize that paper, although we would like to repeat that from our perspective, the double umbrella construction has functioned well in the past, but that there may be alternative scenarios, that also need to be investigated in the context of the upcoming portfolio analysis. DANS is nationally collaborating with a great variety of partners, and the Dutch data landscape, although internationally perceived as exemplary, can still be improved. The evaluation report rightly remarks: “DANS should continue to communicate and explain its own position to key stakeholders in the near future. The panel advises that this is part of efforts to increase presence and visibility of DANS at universities and to strengthen networks with key stakeholders (universities, data users, data providers, funding organizations and other promoters of ‘Open Science’).

In the recent advisory report on the national digital infrastructure for scientific research “Excellent research requires excellent infrastructure” (NWO, 2017) DANS is mentioned alongside with SURF(sara) and NLeSC: “Three organisations are key to providing digital infrastructure at the Dutch national level: SURF, the Netherlands eScience Center, and DANS”.

In the past few years there has been a growing demand for coordination, but we believe creating ever more coordinating bodies (all coordinating independently, parallel and sometimes contrary to each other) is not helpful. Moreover, the national coordinators should not forget that they are part of the international science and data system, and that sometimes European and international coordination is more effective than national deliberations.