Dear members of the board,

We are extremely pleased with the SEP evaluation outcome as reported by the Evaluation Committee. The committee evaluates both our scientific quality and relevance to society as ‘excellent’. The committee praises the decisions and lines of focus that have been chosen by NIDI and which have contributed to and resulted in this evaluation of excellence over the period 2014-2020. We very much value that the committee has taken a truly internationally comparative approach and praises our work to be exemplary and belonging to the European top and beyond. We equally appreciate the fact that our viability is rated as ‘very good’. This assessment indicates that we are very well on track, but need to prepare for the upcoming challenges in terms of leadership of the institute in the coming decade. These changes already have our full attention and the evaluation report and related recommendations are a further inspiration to secure this.

The committee provides suggestions throughout the report, and detailed recommendations at the end. One overarching recommendation is to develop a strategic plan for the future (recommendation 5). This is absolutely valid and this has been discussed with the NIDI Management team and the KNAW since the start of the new director in the fall of 2020. The SEP evaluation was well-timed, as it allows us to include recommendations made by the SEP committee. The strategic vision will, as planned, be finalized in the fall of 2021 and discussed with the KNAW. It will also provide a basis for securing and being prepared for the future in terms of the other suggestions on viability made by the committee. In line with the suggestion made by the evaluation committee, we will include the SAB for feedback and suggestions on these future plans.

The committee recommends (Recommendation 1) a roof-tile construction to secure a successful and smooth succession of theme-leaders and senior researchers. We fully endorse this idea and have already extensively discussed it in the Management Team. In the past year, steps have been taken to attract renowned scholars to the institute. So far, these strategic investments have been financed from the limited NIDI lumpsum budget. The suggested roof-tile construction is crucial for the future viability of the institute, but can only be realized by additional one-time incidental funding from the KNAW, as the current lumpsum (that finances 12 permanent academic positions), does not allow for this. The KNAW has indicated to be receptive to this based on a strategic plan that is anticipated for fall 2021.
Furthermore, the committee recommends to expand the number of permanent positions at the institute given the imbalance in the current age structure. The institute lacks a substantial group of mid-career scholars to further secure innovative cutting-edge research and a healthy structure for the future. We fully endorse this observation as well as the suggestion made by the committee to add at least three permanent positions. We call upon the KNAW as this can only be realized with a structural increase of the NIDI lumpsum.

We appreciate the suggestions made by the committee on how to fully support and use the potential of our early career scholars (Recommendations 2 and 6). The observations of the committee clearly point to the major transition that NIDI has made over the reporting period, a time in which PhD candidates and postdocs have become by far the largest share of NIDI staff. This clearly calls for further consideration on how to create the most stimulating climate for these early career scholars. First steps have already been implemented, by developing an internal PhD course as well as a vision statement on early career training of PhDs. These steps are very much in line with the recommendations of the committee, but the committee also inspires us to further expand and rethink early career training. These further steps will also take into account recent pleas both in the KNAW and in academia more general on broadening the criteria of excellence ("recognition and reward").

Also, the recommendation on investment in research (data) infrastructure (Recommendation 4), is timely given the fact that GGP will be included on the ESFRI roadmap and in academia at large there is now ample attention on the importance of research infrastructure. We very much subscribe the view that NIDI has a unique position in this regard that should be secured for the future.

The committee, furthermore, encourages the institute to explore new promising lines of research in addition to those that have been well developed (Recommendation 3). The committee suggests this not necessarily calls for new theme groups but can be achieved by further integrating innovative methods and topics. We feel that our existing (international) network as well as the embeddedness in the University of Groningen (and its different departments) provide ample opportunities to capitalize on this in the future. In line with the evaluation report, we want to make sure that NIDI continues its key function as a national and international hub in the broad field of population studies.

We are extremely grateful to the evaluation committee for its work in these rather unusual times due to the COVID pandemic. We thank the committee for the clear suggestions on how to secure NIDI’s future. The vibrant research community at the institute can only continue to thrive with the most excellent researchers in the field. It is obvious that attracting established and promising scholars in the near future is fundamental for keeping NIDI’s research and outreach at the most excellent and competitive levels. This will imply further financial investments from the KNAW, incidental as well as structural as outlined above. We call upon the board, trusting that the necessary action for achieving this will be taken.

Prof. dr. H.A.G. de Valk
Director NIDI