



Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
Mr.dr.s. I.K. van Engelshoven
Minister
PO Box 16375
2500 BJ The Hague

Subject: portfolio evaluation report KNAW and NWO institutes

The Hague, 21 February 2019

Dear Mrs. Van Engelshoven,

We are pleased to present the portfolio evaluation report which we received on 10 January 2019 from the Portfolio Committee, chaired by Prof. Daan Frenkel.

The *Vision for Science 2025* document (*Wetenschapsvisie 2025*) announced the need for an evaluation of the institute portfolio, the system that comprises the national research institutes of the Academy (KNAW) and NWO. Instead of focusing on the performance of the individual institutes, this evaluation would cover the system as a whole. In response to this, the boards of the Academy and NWO established an independent "Portfolio Committee" in June 2017 and asked the committee to analyse the entire portfolio of institutes in relation to the "knowledge landscape" as a whole and to assess its added value and how well it responds to relevant scientific, societal, and policy developments.

In its report, the Portfolio Committee concludes that the current portfolio of national research institutes has significant added value for the knowledge institutions in the Netherlands, as it increases the effectiveness of Dutch science. The Committee also outlines a direction for future development of the portfolio, and makes recommendations to further strengthen its cohesion, quality, dynamics and responsiveness. This letter contains the joint response of the boards of the Academy and NWO to the Portfolio Committee's report.

Added value of the portfolio

The boards of the Academy and NWO are grateful to the Portfolio Committee for its analysis of the role of the national research institutes within the Dutch knowledge landscape, which also includes research universities and universities of applied sciences, TO2 institutions, and public knowledge organisations. We are pleased that the Committee concludes that the portfolio has added value for the knowledge landscape, and that it provides a stable, responsive, sustainable, and encouraging environment for high-quality research, access to heritage, collections and infrastructure, talent development, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

We also welcome the Committee's assessment that the institutes, both individually and collectively, play an important role and that they succeed in making their scientific knowledge visible and useful to Dutch society. The Committee has formulated clearly what gives the portfolio its added value for Dutch science. In doing so, it provides a clear assessment framework that can be used for further development of the portfolio in the coming years. The Committee has also introduced a number of basic conditions and criteria for added value that national research institutes within the portfolio should meet. We endorse those criteria, which can be used to guide the present institutes within the portfolio and can act as a benchmark for decisions on accession of other institutes.

Governance of the portfolio

The Committee recommends that the Academy and NWO will increasingly treat their institutes as a single portfolio, and calls for more strategic governance of the portfolio. In this way, in the Committee's view, the portfolio can keep pace with scientific developments more dynamically. We endorse the need for shared, strategic choices for the portfolio and are pleased that the Committee recognises that in recent years we have already developed new instruments to improve the governance of the portfolio. We aim to further expand that strategic approach in the near future. The Portfolio Committee proposes that an independent committee be set up which – with input from all stakeholders – would periodically evaluate the portfolio in relation to developments within the Dutch knowledge landscape and issue advice to the Academy and NWO. Such independent advice would be intended to ensure objectivity in decision-making regarding changes in the portfolio.

We endorse the need to involve other relevant parties within the knowledge landscape in strategic choices about institutes and their missions. Our institutes are closely interwoven with the knowledge landscape, including business and industry, and for that reason alone major investments with a long-term impact need to be taken into consideration. Examples of such plans include the sector plans, the Large-Scale Scientific Infrastructure Roadmap, international memberships, the Gravity Programme, the Dutch National Research Agenda (NWA), and the Dutch Knowledge and Innovation Contract. At the same time, we note that a mandate for choices within the portfolio cannot be viewed in isolation from the obligation of the Academy and NWO to be fully accountable for their institutes to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science.

The Committee did not identify any themes of national importance to which the portfolio needs to respond, and we understand why that is so. It illustrates the complexity and weight of the task of assessing the portfolio in the context of changing priorities within science as a whole. Together with the Committee, we note that making strategic choices for the portfolio requires a thorough knowledge and broad overview of the national and international scientific context and the dynamics involved. The boards therefore see an important role for an independent committee to advise explicitly on “blank spots” in the portfolio. The members of that committee would need to have a clear understanding of the relevant developments in numerous disciplines, to be aware of the insights gained by many parties within the knowledge landscape, and to take account of their potential (societal) impact. In its report, the Committee specifically recommends promoting dynamism within the system by setting aside a fixed percentage of the portfolio budget each year so as to create a strategic budget for innovation. We endorse the basic principle that in order to set up something new, something must also be phased out somewhere else. Identifying “blank spots” and deciding what to initiate and what to phase out cannot therefore be seen in isolation from one another. An independent committee would have to address both issues in its advice to the Academy and NWO. The Academy and NWO would like to discuss the consequences of this with other relevant parties, such as the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), and will incorporate the results of that consultation in a more detailed proposal to the Ministry.

We also endorse the Committee's vision of a more coherent policy and better aligned management of the institutes and hence of the portfolio as a whole. Our basic premise here, is that this should aim for efficacy, making full use of the different nature of the organisations and their strengths, while at the same time providing a form of “checks and balances”, and removing barriers to cooperation. Given the Committee's observation that almost all the institutes currently provide added value and that they are satisfied with the current governance, the emphasis should be on optimising the way we support and manage the institutes. We will focus on drawing up a joint policy framework and “rules of the game” for the institutes within the portfolio.



Individual institutes

The Portfolio Committee concludes that, with the exception of DANS (Data Archiving and Networked Services) and NIAS (Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences), all the institutes in the current portfolio meet the basic conditions that the Committee has defined. To varying degrees, the same also applies to the newly defined criteria for added value. We wish to thank the Committee for its comments and recommendations regarding the individual institutes, which are largely familiar to us. We will follow up on the recommendations for increasing the added value of individual institutes, doing so in consultation with the institute directors.

The boards of the Academy and NWO share the Portfolio Committee's view that DANS plays an important role in the development of "open science" and that it would be better to position it differently to the national research institutes. We have already taken the first exploratory steps in that direction. Where NIAS is concerned, we share the Committee's opinion that that institute is of a different nature than the other institutes in the portfolio, and we endorse the observation that its activities are relevant and fit in well with the work of the Academy.

Follow-up

The boards of the Academy and NWO are satisfied with the work of the Committee, which has led to a clear statement regarding the important position of national research institutes. The report provides us with a framework for determining the added value for the Dutch knowledge landscape of both the portfolio as a whole and the institutes individually. Together, the Academy and NWO aim to further shape a more strategic governance of the portfolio, doing so in consultation with the stakeholders involved and in liaison with the Ministry. We consider this report as a starting point for drawing up a joint *Portfolio Action Plan* in 2019. In that plan we will discuss in concrete terms how we intend to give shape to the recommendations for joint strategic governance of the portfolio on the basis of periodic evaluations, increasing responsiveness and dynamism within the system, and ensuring maximum objectivity in decision-making.

Best regards,

Prof.dr.ir. W. van Saarloos,
Academy President

Prof.dr. C.C.A.M. Gielen,
President of NWO