Evaluation report for the
Research Review of NIDI
2014-2020

July 2021
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1. Introduction

1.1. Scope of the assessment

The Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI) is a research institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW). The quality assessment contained in this report is based on the assessment system as specified in the Standard Evaluation Protocol for Public Research Organizations 2015-2021 (SEP) by the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and the KNAW.

The Board of the KNAW initiated the review of the scientific research done at NIDI during the period 2014-20. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the evaluation being postponed, the KNAW agreed to include seven years in the current evaluation. The review committee was asked to assess the performance by NIDI on the three assessment criteria outlined in the SEP, including strategic targets and the extent to which the institute is equipped to achieve them. In accordance with the protocol, the committee was also asked to reflect on PhD training, research integrity and diversity.

In addition to being a KNAW institute, NIDI is also affiliated with the University of Groningen (UG) and University Medical Centre Groningen (UMCG). For this review the committee was asked to discuss the impact and consequences of this affiliation and the close collaboration. However, its feedback and recommendations are directed at the institute and the KNAW board.

1.2. The review committee

The Board of the KNAW has appointed the following members of the committee for the research review:

- Prof. Koenraad Matthis, full professor in Sociology, Centre for Sociological Research (CeSO), KU Leuven, Belgium;
- Prof. Renske Keizer, full professor in Family Sociology at the Erasmus University Rotterdam;
- Prof. Daniel Lichter, professor of Policy Analysis and Management and Sociology, Cornell University, US;
- Prof. Alexia Fünnkranz-Prskawetz, professor of Mathematical Economics at the Institute of Statistics and Mathematical Methods in Economics, TU Wien, and deputy director of the Vienna Institute of Demography at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, Austria;
- Prof. Karsten Hank, professor of Sociology at the University of Cologne and Research Fellow at the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW), Berlin, Germany.

More detailed information about the members of the committee can be found in appendix 1. The KNAW board has appointed Meg Van Bogaert as the secretary to the committee.

1.3. Independence

All members of the committee signed a declaration and disclosure form to ensure that the committee members judge without bias, personal preference or personal interest, and the judgment is made without undue influence from the institute, the programmes, or other stakeholders. Any existing professional relationships between committee members and programmes under review were reported. The committee concluded that there was no risk in terms of bias or undue influence.
1.4. Information provided to the committee

The committee received detailed documentation consisting of the following parts:

- NIDI Addendum Self-assessment 2020;
- Standard Evaluation Protocol 2015-2021;
- KNAW Manual for research assessments;
- Kwaliteit, rol en belang van het NIDI, eindrapport (2013);
- Midterm review NIDI (2017);
- NIDI-zelfevaluatie van de KNAW portfolio-evaluatie (2019);
- Conclusions and Recommendations concerning NIDI, portfolio evaluation (2019).

1.5. Procedures followed by the committee

The site visit of NIDI took place on 10, 11 and 12 May 2021. Originally, the members of the committee were intended to meet with each other and with NIDI in The Hague during an onsite meeting in May 2020. However, due to the global Covid-19 pandemic, the site visit to The Hague was first postponed and later replaced by remote meetings via a digital platform. Prior to the (virtual) site visit, the committee members were asked to read the documentation and formulate questions for the interviews. During an online kick-off meeting, approximately two weeks prior to the site visit, the committee was introduced to the Standard Evaluation Protocol, agreed upon procedural matters, and discussed its preliminary findings.

During its final meeting on 12 May 2021, the committee jointly discussed the scoring of the institute. To conclude the visit, the committee presented the main preliminary conclusions to NIDI and the KNAW. The schedule for the site visit is included in appendix 2.

This report describes the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the committee. NIDI has been assessed in relation to research programmes and institutes worldwide in similar disciplines and on similar topics. The texts for the assessment report were finalised through email exchanges. The final version was presented to the NIDI management and KNAW Board for factual corrections and comments. The report was completed on 12 July 2021.
II ASSESSMENT OF THE INSTITUTE
2. Strategy, targets, and organisation

2.1. Introduction

In 2020 NIDI marked its 50-year anniversary and celebrated its many achievements as a national and international leader in population studies. The period of evaluation (2014-2020) has been one of transformation and several significant events. After the revisioning and reorganisation of NIDI in 2012-2013, the unexpected termination of the annual lumpsum budget by the Ministry of Education in 2013 placed NIDI's continuing existence in jeopardy. The KNAW, University of Groningen (UG) and University Medical Centre Groningen (UMCG) stepped in to guarantee future funding of NIDI. In addition to being an institute of the KNAW, NIDI is now also affiliated with the UG/UMCG. At the end of 2020, a new director (Helga de Valk) was appointed. The timing of the site visit was requested by the new director, to allow her to use the evaluation and the committee’s recommendations to prepare for the future policy and direction of the institute. The evaluation also provides a solid foundation for the new director to formulate and share her vision for NIDI.

2.2. Organisational structure

The research at NIDI is performed in four research theme groups:

- Families & Generations
- Ageing & Longevity
- Migration & Migrants
- Work & Retirement

These theme groups are headed by leading researchers who are renowned scholars in their fields. In addition to the NIDI director, the four theme group leaders and the head of Operational Management form the Management Team.

In her opening statement on the first day of the virtual visit, the President of the KNAW was very complimentary and supportive of NIDI, taking “parental pride” in NIDI’s achievements since 2014. The President and Director of the KNAW both explicitly underlined the academic achievements as well as the substantial societal relevance of the research at NIDI. They also indicated that the NIDI policy is well in line with the KNAW expectations. The continuing positive support of the KNAW is important to the scholarly success and financial future of NIDI. The committee will elaborate on this aspect in the Funding and staff section. In line with the positive view of the KNAW President, the committee acknowledges the continuation of competent leadership with the new director. She has taken the reins in a difficult time, in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic and with the upcoming renewal of the affiliation with UG/UMCG. Her strong international network and excellent local and national network are extremely valuable assets for NIDI.

By KNAW standards, NIDI is a small research and (PhD) training institute, but this does not imply a disequilibrium of scale. On the contrary, as a small institution, NIDI is very efficient. Policy and management are carried out effectively, with short lines of consultation, advice, and decision. This leads to a human-sized policy and management structure, which helps explain why the staff is satisfied with the direction of the institute policy. The virtual meetings indicated a vibrant, cohesive and synergistic research organization—one with a proud history and optimistic future.
2.3. Mission and strategy

It is NIDI’s mission to conduct high-quality scientific research on population issues and to disseminate and enhance the use of demographic knowledge to stakeholders in academia, policy and society at large. The institute aims to build and maintain the demographic knowledge infrastructure for population issues, one that will address the critical challenges that demographic developments pose for individuals and society. Interdisciplinarity is a key asset in this respect, since causes and consequences of demographic behaviour are often grounded in the social, economic, and cultural domains. NIDI also succeeds in building that demographic knowledge infrastructure for the future by raising new generations of demographic researchers.

The NIDI research agenda is driven by societal issues, scientific curiosity, and a demand for new knowledge. It is interdisciplinary and internationally oriented, integrates fundamental research and applied studies, and stresses the micro-foundations of population change. Finally, it has a clear focus that captures the ultimate nature of population change: “Lives in Contexts”. That is, demographic decision-making, processes, and outcomes—fertility, mortality, and migration—are shaped by the social, economic, and policy environment.

NIDI has defined four themes to structure its research activities. Although the number of themes is limited, this apparently does not impose serious substantive constraints on NIDI researchers. When new projects emerge, they can easily align with one of the four themes. The themes are seen as a long-lasting structure, allowing rejuvenation via new developments. The management team highlighted the success of the current model as well as the innovation that is occurring within each of the four core themes. Any concerns that there might be some reluctance at the NIDI management level to modifying core themes was not shared by the Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) members.

The four NIDI themes are broad, and many new topics and lines of research fit within one of the themes. But the committee also issues a warning for the future. Demography is a dynamic field that has changed significantly over the past decade—in data, methods, and disciplinary perspectives. New ideas (and technical innovations) generally come from PhD candidates and early to mid-career scholars, and might not always easily fit into one of the themes (e.g., computational social science, biodemography, and spatial analyses, including GIS and spatial econometrics). The disciplinary-diverse backgrounds of the PhD candidates seemed out-of-sync with the four main themes of NIDI. This suggests that PhD candidates in the applicant pool have demographic interests that often reside outside traditional or classical areas of (social) demography and NIDI. When asked, the early career scholars had excellent ideas for an additional fifth theme; be it in spatial demography or computational demography. Without explicitly recommending the addition of a fifth theme, the committee stresses the importance of an open attitude to the sustainability of the existing four themes and of constantly monitoring them with new and emerging substantive and methodological developments in the field. Expanding the disciplinary expertise of NIDI research in allied social science areas, including economics or geography, should also be considered on a continuing basis as the disciplinary mix of population studies internationally changes. In this respect, the ideas and suggestions of young, talented researchers, especially in fields outside the traditional areas of demography, should receive close attention.

2.4. Affiliation with Groningen

The self-assessment document initially raised questions about NIDI’s administrative connection with UG/UMCG and whether this affiliation might complicate collaborations with other universities. During the virtual visit, however, the committee obtained a clearer understanding of the affiliation, the collaborations with UG/UMCG as well as the collaborations with other institutions. The interviews with NIDI research staff
provided a positive impression towards the arrangement with UG/UMCG. Not only did UG/UMCG step-in at a critical time for NIDI, the affiliation also provides stability for the future. Groningen often is a preferred partner, but not an exclusive one. The main criticism that was given from the NIDI perspective, is the preference of UG/UMCG to employ PhD candidates rather than postdocs. However, this appears to be a nation-wide preference at Dutch universities due to financial incentives, that is providing financial rewards for completed PhDs.

NIDI has not neglected its many connections to other Dutch and European universities. Indeed, multiple examples were provided to the committee of collaborative projects with several other Dutch universities, including Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Utrecht. There are also close collaborations with Statistics Netherlands and Dutch Pensions Fund, and international universities (i.e., Southampton). Based on concrete observations (in terms of academic performance) and the interpretation (of the nature of the collaboration) by KNAW and NIDI management, the committee is convinced of the positive net benefits of the NIDI-Groningen affiliation and its steep upward trajectory. It provides financial stability to NIDI for at least several years and allows the institute to connect not only to UGt, but also the UMCG.

2.5. Funding and staff

A topic that was discussed in detail during the visit was the composition of the research staff. Just 13 academic positions are financed by direct funding from KNAW and UG/UMCG, forming the core research staff. All other research staff have temporary contracts and rely on “soft money” (second and third stream). This situation produces several challenges for the institute.

(Im)balance in research staff

The small number of tenured positions puts enormous pressure on NIDI to continuously obtain and manage (large, multi-investigator) grants to be able to hire PhD candidates and post-docs, who typically serve in research support roles. Early-career researchers are indispensable in carrying out much of the primary or administration data collection, and the day-to-day computational and statistical work. They also co-author technical research reports and peer-reviewed papers with the principal investigators as part of their training activities. Since NIDI is highly successful in attracting external funding, there is an imbalance between permanent and temporary research staff. All the more so because NIDI frees up money from its core budget to organise and support grant applications. Based on the interviews, the financial and administrative staff of NIDI is, by all accounts, superb. Due to the excellent support staff, NIDI staff can focus fully on writing (successful) grants and implement them. In addition, no teaching obligations creates an attractive research climate for scholars. This an important component in successfully acquiring large and prestigious grants, which have positive implications for NIDIs core budget.

Another challenge is the so-called pipeline issues for early and mid-career researchers. The early-career researchers were grateful for the opportunities afforded by their current positions; they also were generally satisfied with NIDI as a supportive organization and collegial environment. However, none of early-career researchers viewed their long-term career prospects at NIDI with any real optimism. Most expected to leave at the end of their fixed contracts unless they were able to secure a major grant or contract funding to support themselves. This is unfortunate, especially at a time when NIDI faces hiring challenges in the near future when many highly productive and visible senior researchers are expected to retire. There is a potentially serious pipeline issue, one marked by absence of mid-career researchers who have substantial research records or administrative experience and who would be eligible to fulfil the role of theme group leader.
NIDI’s leadership team is aware of the bifurcated age distribution of its staff and its implications for future growth and productivity. They acknowledge the urgent need to develop a strong and professionally visible middle management and research team (in terms of professional seniority) and is actively pursuing strategies to prepare for the transition to the next generation. The committee is positive about the KNAW’s commitment to facilitate so-called “roof-top constructions” for succession in senior positions. This could take the form of “bridge funding” for talented researchers on temporary contracts to find the opportunity to acquire a grant, and could certainly help retain research staff and ensure a smoother transition in leadership over the coming decades. However, in the long term this construction will not solve the pipeline problems; a structural solution is needed for NIDI to invest in early- and mid-career researchers and ensure the long-term viability of NIDI (e.g., tenure-track positions). In addition, identifying and attracting senior researchers who are currently located at Dutch universities could be an alternative.

The limited possibility in offering tenured positions also is reflected in the general lack of diversity in the senior research staff. Diversity occurs primarily from the “bottom up”, i.e., with younger scholars who could bring different research interests, new research synergies, and cutting-edge technical skills to the overall NIDI research and training portfolio. The Strategic Advisory Board (SAB) apparently does not interfere with hiring decisions or appointments of theme leaders. Nevertheless, it might be smart to alter this position if NIDI wants to attract the team leaders of the future and wants more diversity within the group of theme leaders (as they are now all white, Dutch senior males). The upcoming retirement of several senior research staff should be seen as an opportunity to create much-needed diversity.

Early and mid-career research staff

In this section, the committee reflects on the function, role, and position of early- and mid-career researchers at the NIDI. The early career scholars the committee met are mostly directly assigned to specific externally funded projects. The overall impression the committee got was very positive: this group feels well integrated into their thematic areas. This is partly due to the flat hierarchies at NIDI—also mentioned by PhD candidates—but also because all of them collaborate in research projects acquired by senior academic staff. Staff mentioned that there are opportunities at UG/UMCG to be involved in teaching, this is important for those who aim at building an academic career. At the same time the close integration may come at the price of a relative lack of professional independence to develop new projects or ideas on their own, even though NIDI and the senior staff fully support efforts to acquire (prestigious) personal grants.

The limited number of permanent academic positions and incentives in the Dutch university system to hire pre- rather than post-doctoral researchers, results in a situation without an optimal balance between senior (supervising) academic staff and early career staff (PhD candidates and starting postdocs). Given the importance of training the next generation of demographers—and NIDI’s overall success in this field during the evaluation period—an increase in tenure-track and, subsequently, permanent positions for mid-career researchers seems desirable. The main concern is the lack of a tenure-track perspective at NIDI. Getting a permanent position at NIDI is perceived as an unlikely and almost random event. NIDI management is aware of this issue and is looking for ways to provide some perspective to early career scholars—albeit this usually comes in the form of temporary appointments from grant monies. The SAB indicated that several universities are now taking steps to offer long-term career trajectories to young and mid-career researchers, for example tenure-track programmes. This implies that universities might be more attractive than NIDI for talented early- and mid-career research staff. To help early career scholars to develop into independent mid-career scholars—either at NIDI or another institute—it would be important to give them more time for developing their own research line. The committee considers this to be a KNAW-wide challenge and recommends that the NIDI, together with other KNAW institutes, considers offering a portfolio of alternative
career opportunities to researchers with different research and teaching interests.

NIDI also could make better use of the potential of junior scholars. NIDI’s early- and mid-career scholars are exceptionally talented and professionally engaged. They did not “complain” about being overburdened; rather to the contrary, they would be willing to be more involved in activities such as co-supervision of PhD candidates. This issue was recognized by the senior research staff and management, and they agree that there is room for improvement. There are clear benefits for both the (beginning) PhD candidates (smoother start) as well as the postdocs (experiences with supervision and a potential increase of collaborations leading to joint publications).

Perhaps surprisingly, many of the early-career researchers were unable to clearly identify their long-term career options. Most of them seemingly would be happy to find a research position of any kind, and anywhere at the end of their term at NIDI. They also seemed reluctant about discussing their futures with supervisors. If they were looking elsewhere for a position, they worried about possibly signalling a lack of commitment to NIDI. Open discussions with supervisors about the future at NIDI, and even clarity about the low likelihood of a future position at NIDI, is important for this group of early career scholars, still in the preliminary stages of building an academic career.

In conclusion, NIDI is currently home to an extraordinarily selective group of talented young scholars who require additional professional nurturing by the senior staff at NIDI. Most seem locked into their current funded projects, having little time to work on other independent papers or research projects. If incubating young scholars is an important NIDI goal, these early career scholars need more time to better balance their current collaborative work obligations with senior researchers with the need for greater independence to work on topics that better reflect their own research interests or take full advantage of their unique skill sets and disciplinary perspectives. These opportunities could be defined more clearly in NIDI’s written contracts with post-docs. Demonstrated independence is often necessary for success in the job market for a tenure-track academic or permanent applied research.

Support staff and facilities
The discussions with the committee revealed considerable praise for the support staff involved in HR, finances, and IT. Not only does the support staff handle many administrative tasks that might otherwise fall to the researchers, they are knowledgeable and easily approachable. Recipients of personal grants stress the excellent administrative support they get at NIDI. Being a KNAW institute helps since NIDI can also rely on the service centre of KNAW. At the same time there is concern that (part of) the support activities within NIDI might be outsourced to the KNAW when support staff retires. It seems desirable to maintain the decentralized service at NIDI and to secure a sufficiently large number of support staff to cater these projects. There is important intellectual exchange at NIDI during the grant application process, explaining—to some extent—NIDI’s past and recent success in obtaining large social science research grants. Day-to-day familiarity and interactions between researchers and NIDI’s in-house technical/administrative staff is part of NIDI success in the current competitive funding environment.

NIDI is institutional host to several broadly accessible and high visible research data infrastructures, most importantly the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP). NIDI representatives stressed the challenges of facing the NIDI’s on-going support for data collection, archiving and dissemination, but nevertheless are reluctant to ask for an expansion of direct support services by NIDI. Rather, the Dutch landscape should change to foster collaboration between “producers” of research data and to sustain the maintenance (not only the building-up) of data infrastructures (including the maintaining meta-data for users). It would be
helpful, if KNAW would regularly stress this issue in the policy arena and in public debates. KNAW could even increase staff support for NIDI to ensure the continuity in the data infrastructure and secure funding from external sources in the long term. Maintaining NIDI’s reputation as a premier national and international data resource is essential for the financial stability and its large leadership role in field of European population studies.
3. Assessment of NIDI criteria

3.1. Research quality

The focus on the four core themes over the evaluation period seems justified, both substantively and in terms of exploiting NIDI’s comparative advantages in the Dutch academic landscape. Importantly, NIDI’s themes cover a broad range of topics (and methodologies), which also offer opportunities for thematically cross-cutting research between existing groups at NIDI. NIDI has a clear focus on social demography. The various meetings with NIDI staff revealed a broad interdisciplinary perspective in its approaches to research and training. The committee agrees that NIDI is interdisciplinary by its subject: family dynamics and population studies. In particular the early career postdocs and PhD candidates made a convincing case that NIDI is an interdisciplinary institute, at least within the social sciences. This group suggested that the potential of all the interdisciplinary knowledge available at NIDI is still not fully exploited. New topics – beyond social sciences–like data science, digitalization, biodemography etc. were mentioned as opportunities to develop into new areas. NIDI’s PhD candidates contribute to the institute’s interdisciplinary profile, having diverse disciplinary backgrounds that complement the “sociology biased” background of the more senior academic staff. The latter group could make more use out of all the knowledge available, for example by mapping out the skillset of all employees. Furthermore, the institute makes good use of its affiliation with UG/UMCG to incorporate additional disciplinary perspectives (e.g., economics) in its research activities. The institute is encouraged to expand interdisciplinary collaboration, especially with the UMCG and to foster research on health-related issues.

Quantitative and qualitative quality indicators

Based on the self-evaluation report the committee had the impression that the indicators were predominantly focussing on quantitative measures of research productivity. However, during the site visit, the committee was reassured that the interpretation of quality indicators is much broader in practice and includes—for example—creative renewal of the research, societal relevance and training the next generation. A particular NIDI strength is one of highlighting individual preferences and behaviours while uncovering the interplay of social background, social networks, meso-level characteristics, etc. which ultimately will determine life course decisions. The insight into the research by the four group leaders was impressive.

NIDI demonstrates an impressive record in high quality scientific output. The two most common quantitative indicators of an institution’s research performance are publications in top-tier journals and the acquisition of prestigious grants. In both regards, NIDI is exceptional: NIDI researchers regularly publish in top-tier, English language journals, including European Sociological Review, European Journal of Population, Demography, Demographic Research, and Population Studies; and they are successful at all levels of ERC-grants (Starting, Consolidator, Advanced). The share of scientists with personal grants is very high and focused on diverse topics, yet remain broadly focused on social demography and share substantive connections across the four research themes. Grant holders also increasingly translate the results of their scientific research into socially relevant information and advice (e.g., Demos or NIDI’s LinkedIn and Tweeter feeds). NIDI also has a substantial public policy audience, one that includes both government officials and policy makers, as well as junior researchers with applied research interests. That is one of the reasons why the academic output of the NIDI is so impressive. The quality and impact of NIDI’s research reflected in stellar reputations of senior research staff, and, among other indicators, is revealed in the number of invited lectures and being member of several prestigious advisory committees.

The hiring of world-class research scholars clearly reflects NIDI’s outstanding position in the Dutch (and even
global) landscape. However, NIDI’s reputation for excellence does not depend on the performance of one single scholar—it truly is a collective success. The relation between theme leaders and project leaders is clearly apparent and theme leaders are very supportive of the project leaders. Also, it is not the case that one of NIDI’s thematic groups lags behind another one, or that one thematic group contributes the lion’s share of NIDI’s output. The entire institute performs exceptionally well.

NIDI encourages and supports scholars who bring external funding to NIDI. It has an exceptionally strong international reputation as an attractive place to work for scholars who receive and administer large, prestigious grants. Teaching obligations are often minimal, which allows research staff to focus on their research and to disseminate key findings in ways that increase its societal impact. This has not posed a potential threat in terms of NIDI’s overall research focus; the four themes provide some focus and allow for flexibility. Projects financed through personal grants infuse NIDI’s research portfolio with new topics and fostering new interdisciplinary research themes. Research projects are typically well integrated into NIDI’s broad themes, without threatening the project leaders’ autonomy or diverting attention to ancillary research topics. The PI’s clearly benefit from theme leaders’ advice, which is generously given, both on intellectual/academic matters and on practical issues such as personnel issues.

Demographic data hub
NIDI arguably is the central research hub that brings demography to the Netherlands. It has moved from being a hub for descriptive and analytical demography in former times to a strong sociological oriented demography hub. For the future, the director sees NIDI as becoming a growing hub for demographic data, in its increasingly diverse forms (i.e., registration data, spatial data, administrative data, health records, vital statistics etc.). Nurturing the administrative and research connections with Dutch universities is therefore very important. NIDI has already established its own surveys and works intensively on methodological improvements in gathering and analysing data. In this respect, the close collaboration with Statistics Netherlands and Pension fund is worth mentioning. By its strong connection to Statistics Netherlands, NIDI has unusual access to state-of-art computing facilities and statistical software. Having access to various data sets and linking various data offers opportunities for much more sophisticated and nuanced network analysis—a field of high importance for the future where NIDI is taking up a leading role. These new collaborative activities depend almost entirely on external project funds, which may not be sustainable if there is no follow-up project funding available.

Open science, research integrity and data infrastructure
The committee was impressed by all the work done by NIDI in terms of open science and research integrity. NIDI makes every effort to facilitate work on these topics. Rules imposed by the European Government and the KNAW are translated into NIDI’s specific situation and are meticulously observed and implemented. To successfully address these issues a considerable investment of time and energy is required. NIDI ensures that sufficient staff is available to do practical follow-ups. At the same time, given the size of NIDI and the available manpower, it might be smart to outsource part (or much) of these responsibilities to the KNAW.

NIDI has built up an impressive structure on Open Science (OS) and Research Integrity (RI)—though it was noted that the structure always needs to be reconsidered as the issues are dynamic. NIDI is closely collaborating with the open data infrastructure for Social Sciences and Economics ODISEI. Having these kinds of data infrastructures is of great help when doing research, although its management is time intensive and expensive. Even though it became clear that NIDI stimulates and nurtures these data infrastructures well, both financially and instrumentally, it requires substantial staff time and administrative resources.
3.2. Relevance to society

NIDI’s work is relevant for society on a very broad basis. This also—and importantly—includes NIDI’s engagement in the production of data infrastructures. Overall, NIDI is increasingly recognized for effectively translating its academic research into societally-relevant insights. It has also substantially improved its ability to reach out to a broader public through social media and other public engagement activities. The institute’s scientific output is regularly translated into concrete policy advice and NIDI’s more recent—and intensified—outreach activities (through social media, for example) are likely to further increase its impact on public debates.

Outreach and valorisation were always a major part of NIDI’s activities, but over the past years additional investment was made and a shift is taking place concerning NIDI’s focus. Less attention is given to supplying reports intended only for ministries, and more on generating a wider societal impact. An inspiring example of research that led to broad societal impact is the Netherlands Population Outlook 2050 report, which was coordinated by NIDI on request of nine Dutch ministries. The committee especially appreciated the Video Portraits of which some were shown during the virtual visit. They allow scholars to learn how to transmit their knowledge and research in one minute. A renewed focus on social media and outreach to the general public gets more attention and becomes visible in societal debates. NIDI is actively elevating its research visibility and impact through the social media. This deserves recognition and appreciation, although it remains “work in progress” that requires on-going investments in staff time and money. NIDI has hired a part-time person for this purpose—to handle social media and accelerate recent strides in disseminating research findings to the general audience and public policy. Twitter and Linked-In also can be vital sources of information for expanding the applicant pool for PhDs and post-docs.

3.3. Viability

The new NIDI director at the evaluation meeting outlined her vision, including NIDI’s continuing efforts to secure and support external funding, strengthening mid-career options, and expanding the network with universities further. In terms of (future) research areas, NIDI mentioned focus on migration (where it seems that NIDI is well connected with MPI Rostock, Southampton, IIASA). Other areas include the effort in fostering the theme on contemporary fertility trends and family dynamics with putting continuous efforts in their data collection and extending the theme on labour markets and ageing. Furthermore, the aim is to search for a follow-up of the theme on the more theoretical work in population projections.

Throughout the (virtual) meetings, NIDI representatives mentioned that one of the central goals of NIDI was expanding the number and size of research grants and contracts. The committee agrees that external funds could help to bring in new themes to the NIDI-portfolio. Whether these result in new teams or in a new focus for existing teams seems to be an open question. From the committee’s standpoint, it is important that grants should not be an end in itself but rather a means to an end (i.e., innovative scientific contributions in top-ranked peer reviewed outlets). Too much emphasis on “more grants” contributes to a kind of frenetic work life—a rat race—that can be counter-productive if it diverts scholarly attention towards areas or topics of research “where the money is”. For example, it seems that NIDI has increasingly focused its attention on health and aging, perhaps to the detriment of pursuing other important topics that benefit demography as a discipline (e.g., historical demography, where funding is more limited but nevertheless an important research tradition at NIDI).

NIDI is a very successful institute that produces outstanding research, can attract many prestigious grants, and is attractive for researchers with personal grants. However, the amount of external grants has a limit
when it comes to ensuring a healthy and sustainable institute. A limit on ratios between tenured researchers and early and mid-career researchers on temporary contracts seems to have been reached. It seems crucial for the next years that NIDI solves the problem of the lack of long-term perspective for early career researchers, missing mid-career scholar positions and the succession of retiring senior research staff. It is important that KNAW supports NIDI efforts to reach a more balanced employee structure replacing the currently rather polarized structure of a few senior scientists and a huge pool of PhDs and early career scholars. Going forward, KNAW may be unable or unlikely to provide additional core funding to the NIDI. The current combination of a small permanent research staff, the successful acquisition of large and impressive grants and the inability to offer career perspectives to young, talented researchers does not seem to lead to a sustainable future. The committee urges the KNAW—together with NIDI—to determine what can be done to provide systematic support to the institute. The committee has in mind, for example, a tenure-track programme, a larger core staff, rewarding success in grant applications and filling the pipeline to prepare talented early and mid-career researchers for senior positions.

The archival data at NIDI, such as the GGP, are sources of considerable visibility and academic prestige across Europe. A serious threat to this crucial resource is that continued funding is never ensured. Widespread access and dissemination of these data increasingly requires an IT or technical support staff to work with the metadata. This important work can be extraordinarily time-consuming and skill-intensive and may well require additional commitments from KNAW and other funding sources. Archival data is essential for young scholars who lack the professional reputation or experience to acquire funding on their own. The archival data at NIDI is a national treasure and a public good that is essential to NIDI’s continuing viability and stature as an organization.

In conclusion, based on its excellent research, talented researchers, successful grant applications, strong focus on societal relevance and well-managed organisation by a director with a clear vision, the committee sees a bright future for NIDI. The aspirations of the institute are very laudable. This is also a time of opportunity (with a new NIDI director) and new challenges in an increasingly competitive funding environment. NIDI’s viability is essential to our understanding of the demographic challenges facing The Netherlands and much of Europe, including population aging and health, immigration and integration, below-replacement fertility, changing demographic context for childbearing and childrearing, and family changes caused by on-going economic (re)structuring and global inequality. Maintaining NIDI’s place as a national and international leader will require continuing administrative and financial support from the KNAW. New investments also will be essential for taking full advantage of new opportunities and challenges NIDI faces in the upcoming years. In addition to funding a roof-top construction to replace several senior researchers in the coming years, the committee calls for attention to a sustainable approach to the shortage of mid-career scholars and the inadequately filled pipeline.

3.4. Quantitative assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research quality</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevance to society</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viability</td>
<td>Very good</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Report for the research review of NIDI | July 2021
4. PhD training and supervision

The committee spoke to PhD candidates who are employed by NIDI and occupy NIDI’s office spaces (if the Covid-19 measures allow). Apart from this group of approximately 25 PhD candidates, another group of PhD candidates (similar in size) has joint appointments with NIDI and a university (often Groningen). This second group is less often at the institute and seems less integrated in the organization. This was confirmed by the PhD candidates. This might partly be ascribed to the pandemic and the different theme groups in which the PhD candidates find themselves but is a point worthy of attention. Many NIDI-funded PhD candidates work at different physical locations, and the committee encourages NIDI to consider how both groups can work together, and "synergize" and cooperate across research settings and thematical domains.

The PhD candidates expressed their appreciation for the supervision of their research. They emphasized that the (co)promoters are easy to reach and that their (research and other) questions are dealt with quickly and efficiently. The organizational structure is not very hierarchical, and the PhD candidates feel that they are full-fledged part of the research staff. There is regular contact between the PhDs and the (co)promoters, providing them with a safety net and inspiring challenges. The committee was pleased by the apparent generosity of senior NIDI researchers, who clearly recognize the need for graduate students to write publishable co-authored papers and, at the end of their training, to be able to write sole-authored papers or papers with other early-career colleagues. The PhD candidates furthermore mentioned that they were encouraged to spend time abroad, attend summer schools, and other research and training activities. They also feel welcome to participate in other tasks on a voluntary basis, like teaching and outreach activities, that helps them to broaden their skills.

The number of enrolling PhD candidates has increased over the period of evaluation, which has led to "entry cohorts". The PhD candidates underline the importance of forming these cohesive cohorts, not only in terms of their formal contacts, but also informally. The committee encourages NIDI to stimulate these cohorts in organizing activities in the training programmes. This might also lead to the desired increase in contact between PhD candidates who do research in different subjects. Even though NIDI PhD candidates can enrol in the graduation school of UMCG, the courses offered at this school are often not relevant for PhD candidates working on demographic research topics. The committee is pleased to learn that NIDI started a PhD course on demography for all NIDI PhD candidates. The committee furthermore suggests that it might be worthwhile for NIDI to orient itself to other graduate schools where PhD candidates could enrol. Also, some PhD candidates argued for more structured training programmes with shared goals and academic expectations. Particularly at the start of their project, PhD candidates require more input.

The PhD candidates had difficulty expressing their career aspirations, most mentioned not to discuss their future career with their supervisors. It was unclear whether this was due to difficulties in identifying career tracks or concerns that negative feedback might be exposed and reflect badly on NIDI. Discussion of job prospects with PhD candidates indicated an extremely competitive winnowing process through matriculation. Some PhD candidates mentioned that they would like more information and discussion about their future opportunities; there is often little information about that now. The PhD candidates the committee talked to would have liked to have more mid-career colleagues to whom they could turn to. Some PhD and junior research staff mentioned that they were somewhat surprised to learn that NIDI represents quite classical demography. Additional skills are brought into NIDI via the PhD candidates coming from different disciplinary fields and it would be nice to have these additional skills more explicitly utilized and disseminated in the regular NIDI-initiatives.
III Recommendations

Based on the findings discussed in this report, the committee has the following specific recommendations for NIDI and the KNAW:

1) The KNAW and NIDI should agree on roof-tile constructions for the succession of theme leaders (and other senior researchers) in the upcoming period. Furthermore, KNAW should provide permanent funding for at least three additional tenure-track positions in NIDI. For these positions NIDI should target (international) early and mid-career researchers with innovative and substantive research agendas that can integrate with and invigorate NIDI’s existing four areas. Candidates should have a demonstrated record of scholarship in peer-reviewed journals. When recruiting for new positions, it is important to strive for diversity in disciplinary background. Ideally the selection committee will include external members as well as NIDI staff.

2) NIDI could make better use of the potential of their junior and mid-career research staff and the opportunities they can provide through for example co-supervision of PhD candidates, and introducing and expanding new themes and areas.

3) The Department of Geography at the University of Groningen has world-class expertise in spatial statistics. This expertise and the cutting-edge training they can offer, represents a comparative advantage vis-à-vis other population research centres in The Netherlands and across Europe. NIDI should leverage this type of advantage to integrate methodological strengths across the four themes. Developing further expertise in spatial analysis (including multi-level modelling), visual techniques (including mapping), and GIS will all be facilitated by stronger connections to population geography and will, in turn, increase the competitiveness of NIDI’s grant applications.

4) NIDI should devote attention to developing a long-term sustainable funding approach for their research (data) infrastructures, such as the GGP. This may not always require more money, but the knowledge of how KNAW’s funding is actually used and potential flexibilities in the administration of that funding can already help structure a cohesive perspective for the future of these infrastructures.

5) The content of the self-assessment report was not particularly forward-looking. The new director and management team could benefit from producing a concise (5-10 page) vision statement that articulates NIDI’s goals over the next 5-10 years, the specific steps NIDI will undertake to meet them, and how this strategic plan will successfully address the institutes major internal and external funding challenges and impeding retirements. This NIDI roadmap would recognize potential new opportunities for building a dynamic research and training program that captures the shifting research interests of early-career scholars. It would also acknowledge emerging policy concerns of elected leaders, Dutch public officials, and non-profit advocacy groups.

6) To build esprit de corps, cohorts of PhD candidates should conduct an annual student-led speaker series or a biennial conference on demographic and public policy issues that reflect their collective substantive interests and/or provide additional training on statistical approaches not currently offered at NIDI or Groningen.
IV Appendices
Appendix 1: Curricula Vitae of the committee members

**Koen Matthijs** is full professor of Sociology and Demography at KU Leuven. He received the master’s degree in Sociology (1978) and holds a PhD in Social Sciences (1983) from KU Leuven. He participates in many European, national, and regional research projects. Currently his main research fields include sociology of the family and family history, historical demography, population studies, comparative family studies, sociology of the life course, demographic methodology, social mobility, social networks, self-help, and informal care, and (international) migration. He is head of the Leuven research group Family and Population Studies. Between 2013 and 2018, he was the first editor-in-chief of the international open access journal Historical Life Course Studies. As to service of society, Koen Matthijs is directing the Flemish Clearinghouse on self-help for more than thirty years. Also, he is an elected member of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts.

**Alexia Fürnkranz-Prskawetz** is professor of Mathematical Economics at the Institute of Statistics and Mathematical Methods in Economics, TU Wien, deputy director of the Vienna Institute of Demography at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, Austria and research associate at the International Institute of Applied Systems Analysis, Laxenburg, Austria. She holds a PhD in mathematical economics from TU Vienna, as well as a Habilitation in population economics and applied econometrics from the same university. After her studies she spent one year as postdoctorate at the Demography Department of the University of California Berkeley and was head of an independent research group for five years at the MPI for Demographic Research, Rostock. She is full member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and member of the Leopoldina (Nationale Akademie der Wissenschaften) in Germany. Her main research interests are in the economic consequences of population and individual ageing, intergenerational transfers in ageing societies, long run economic growth, and agent based computational demography. During the last years she also won several research proposals (FP7, WWTF, FWF, JPI) that aim to investigate the complex interrelationship between the ageing process and economic performance.

**Karsten Hank** is Professor of Sociology at the University of Cologne and Research Fellow at the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW), Berlin. He studied Social Sciences at Ruhr-University Bochum, was a doctoral student at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Rostock, and Head of the Research Unit “Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe” at the Mannheim Research Institute for the Economics of Aging. Hank was a Visiting Professor at King’s College London and an International Research Fellow at VU Amsterdam. He is Co-PI of the German Family Panel (pairfam). His research on aging, families, and health has been published in top-tier journals.

**Renske Keizer** is full professor in Family Sociology at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. Keizer’s primary research interests are fatherhood and parenthood in an internationally comparative perspective, and the dynamics of partner relationships. Her research straddles sociology, pedagogical sciences, demography, and developmental psychology. Central to her work is the application of the theory-based life course approach to the behaviour and well-being of individuals, and (extended) families. She has a demonstrated track record of significant contributions to multiple fields and to policy debates, through several highly cited publications in top-tier journals. She has received several prestigious grants, amongst which an ERC Starting Grant, a NWO VENI and VIDI. In 2016, she was selected as one of the 25 most talented young scholars of all Dutch and Flemish universities. In April 2019 she became member of the Young Academy of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences.

**Daniel Lichter** is Ferris Family professor in the Department of Policy Analysis and Management, Professor of Sociology, and the Director of Cornell’s Institute for the Social Sciences (Cornell University). Prof. Lichter was in 2012 de president van de Population Association of America (2012). Prof. Lichter has an impressive
publication list in the broad field of population studies including population and public policy, poverty and inequality studies, mixed marriages, segregation and integration of migrants. Prof. Lichter has several collaborations with European researchers and a good overview of the state of American and European demography. In 2013, as part of a six-month sabbatical, he was a gas researcher at NIDI.
Appendix 2: Programme of the site visit

Monday 10 May

13.00 – 13.30 Internal meeting SEP committee
13.30 – 14.00 Welcome by KNAW president, KNAW general director and NIDI director
14.00 – 14.30 Introduction NIDI & online tour through the NIDI building
Short break
14.30 – 15.45 Presentation of and discussion with NIDI Management Team
Break
16.00 – 16.15 Video portraits of NIDI early career scholars as part of NIDI 50 anniversary
16.15 – 17.15 Meeting with theme group leaders at NIDI (short pitch per theme)
Short break
17.15 – 18.00 Personal development, HR and financial perspective
18.00 – 18.30 Internal meeting SEP committee (optional)

Tuesday 11 May

13.00 – 13.30 Internal meeting SEP committee
13.30 – 14.30 Meeting with PhD candidates at NIDI
Break
15.00 – 16.00 Meeting with selection of NIDI staff with personal grants
16.00 – 16.30 Meeting with the NIDI employee council
Break
17.00 – 17.30 Meeting with NIDI scientific advisory board representatives
17.30 – 18.00 Open Science and research integrity
18.00 – 18.30 Internal meeting SEP committee (optional)

Wednesday 12 May

12.30 – 13.00 Internal meeting SEP committee
13.00 – 13.45 Meeting early and mid-career scholars
13.45 – 14.30 Data infrastructure
Break
14.45 – 15.30 Meeting on outreach activities and societal relevance
15.30 – 16.00 Wrap up meeting with NIDI director
16.00 – 17.00 Internal meeting SEP committee
17.00 – 17.30 Closing, first feedback/preliminary conclusions
Appendix 3: Quantitative data

Table 1: Research staff in FTE

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<td>FTE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Permanent staff</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Postdocs</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>PhD candidates¹</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>Research assistants</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Total research staff</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>34</td>
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¹ including external PhD candidates.

Table 2 main categories in research output for the years 2013-2018

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<td>61</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-refereed</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>(Chapters in) books</td>
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<td>Refereed</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-refereed</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Reports</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>Dissertations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>UG</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>5</td>
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</table>

Table 3: Funding in FTE

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct funding</td>
<td>1.943</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>1.975</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>2.102</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research grants</td>
<td>601</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>497</td>
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<td>598</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contract research</td>
<td>986</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1.052</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1.083</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1.185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>176</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

³ Including external PhD candidates.
## Appendix 4: Explanation of the SEP scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Research quality</th>
<th>Relevance to society</th>
<th>Viability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 World leading/excellent</td>
<td>The relevant research unit has been shown to be one of the few most influential research groups in the world in its particular field.</td>
<td>The relevant research unit is recognised for making an outstanding contribution to society.</td>
<td>The relevant research unit is excellently equipped for the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Very good</td>
<td>The relevant research unit conducts very good, internationally recognised research.</td>
<td>The relevant research unit is recognised for making a very good contribution to society.</td>
<td>The relevant research unit is very well equipped for the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Good</td>
<td>The relevant research unit conducts good research.</td>
<td>The relevant research unit is recognised for making a good contribution to society.</td>
<td>The relevant research unit makes responsible strategic decisions and is therefore well equipped for the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Unsatisfactory</td>
<td>The relevant research unit does not achieve satisfactory results in its field.</td>
<td>The relevant research unit does not make a satisfactory contribution to society.</td>
<td>The relevant research unit is not adequately equipped for the future.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>