

## Reply of the Netherlands Institute of Ecology (NIOO-KNAW) to the Assessment of Research Quality 2012-2017

The international Peer Review Committee visited NIOO in April 2018. On behalf of NIOO, I would like to thank the members of the committee for their time and effort in delivering this valuable evaluation.

The committee has clearly recognised the institute's national and international strength. Their appreciation was expressed in the separate ratings of 3 x **Excellent (1)** for Research quality, Relevance to society, and Viability. We highly appreciate these three maximum scores and the many words of praise throughout the report!

In addition, the committee has given NIOO valuable recommendations that we will seriously consider for future implementation. We thank them for their insight and vision. Here, we will address the recommendations (*in italics is text taken from the research assessment report*):

### P. 16 *Added value*

The committee recommends *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, thereby identifying the characteristics that make NIOO a unique player.*

We have presented a summary of a more extensive international benchmark analysis in Table 7 of the self-evaluation. Internationally, there are some high-quality and high-impact institutes that NIOO may be compared with, although few institutes have the broad ecological scope NIOO has. We appreciate - and fully agree with - the committee's recommendation to *safeguard the institute's emphasis on basic science as this is a key component of the institute's uniqueness.* We will use the extensive version of our international benchmark analysis to highlight this emphasis on basic science, and other unique selling points such as NIOO's broad ecological scope and long-term research approach.

### P. 16 *Knowledge utilisation*

*The societal relevance of NIOO research is indisputable and the committee recognises and applauds the institute's efforts to reach out to societal stakeholders [...] However, the institute's activities to stimulate and facilitate knowledge utilisation appear to be somewhat ad hoc.* The committee therefore *'recommends that NIOO develops a stronger vision on the institute's strategic relevance to society'* and gives us several valuable suggestions for achieving this, such as *to develop a clear external narrative on the overarching, cross-departmental focus areas at which their societal impact is most evident and to implement a Societal Advisory Board.*

With regard to the first, NIOO had already started to develop this narrative for its stakeholders. With regard to a Societal Advisory Board, we will follow the committee's advice to implement this.

### P. 17 *Structure and size*

*The committee applauds the establishment of the seven research themes, which effectively promote cross-departmental collaboration and provide a nursery for the development of new emerging themes in ecology.*

We fully share the opinion of the committee. We will therefore certainly follow-up on the recommendation to increase the importance of the themes in the future, and to this end will try to *safeguard NIOO strategic budget for the support of well-performing themes and the development of new ones when opportunities emerge.*

#### *P. 17 Personnel Planning*

With regard to my stepping down as director of NIOO in 2020, we agree with the recommendation that the KNAW should start the international recruitment process as soon as possible.

With regard to the retirement of the head of Aquatic Ecology, we have started the process of international recruitment and, as was the case with the previous hiring of a new department head, we will certainly *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.*

*The committee expects that the institute will need to extend the capacity of the bio-informatics unit in the future.*

We agree and will try to find ways (in terms of finances/personnel) to include another bio-informatician in the near future, but we would also like to stress again that there are several more bio-informaticians employed at NIOO, financed through projects.

#### *P. 18 Financial policy*

*The committee learned that NIOO plans to diversify its funding strategy. The committee supports this ambition, but also recognises it as a potential danger if the diversification is not content-driven. In other words, the funding strategy should match the institute's mission. A stakeholder analysis may prove useful.*

We agree and will take care to safeguard our emphasis on basic science, and stay focussed on high-risk, high-gain projects, as encouraged by the committee, in line with our research strategy.

*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. The committee learned that the KNAW has recently established a Knowledge Transfer Office which offers some grant support, but this is likely to be insufficient, particularly given NIOO's aim to diversify its funding and lead more large EU-funded projects.*

We indeed feel a great need for more grant support within NIOO, and will explore possibilities to achieve this goal.

*It is important to safeguard some strategic funding budget, not least to address NWO's new regulations for Vidi laureates, and the committee suggests establishing a solidarity funding principle to achieve this. We know solidarity funding is successful at some universities, but we are not sure if this is also feasible for smaller institutions. This will be investigated.*

*P. 18 PhD programme*

*The committee encourages the institute to ensure that the students are well-prepared for the next steps in their careers, including preparing for alternatives to a career in science.*

NIOO's training budgets are available to support tailor-made personal development programmes for both academic and non-academic careers. NIOO's research output figures show that 17 % of NIOO's PhD students continue their career in the commercial sector, and 9 % in the governmental or not-for-profit sector.

*In addition, it would be good to ensure that all PhD students have an external supervisor.* It is true that not all NIOO PhD students have an external advisor. In part, this role is being taken care of by the research school PE&RC through excellent personal support, providing low-threshold opportunities for PhD students for personal sparring. Nevertheless, we will discuss personal external supervision of each PhD student more explicitly at the start of each new project.

*P. 19 Research integrity and open science*

*In general, appropriate measures to safeguard research integrity are in place at NIOO. The postdocs seem to need more information on a trust person that they can approach in case of problems.*

There is a balanced set of trust persons in place (HRM-section, KNAW trust person, and NIOO integrity person).

It would appear that we need to improve our internal communication about the possibilities that exist, and this will be taken care of.

*P. 19 Diversity and inclusiveness*

*NIOO clearly takes diversity and inclusiveness seriously. To further increase the gender diversity among its staff, the institute should launch a mentoring scheme for female scientists.*

We do indeed take this seriously, and we appreciate the committee's recognition of the current female role models at NIOO. We will continue the mentoring policy of female scientists by offering personal mentorship or other forms of individual support.

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