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Koninklijk Instituut
voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde
Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian
and Caribbean Studies

The Board of the KNAW
P.O. Box 19121
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Response to the Evaluation Report of KITLV

Leiden, 8 May 2018

Dear members of the Board,

We are delighted with the assessment made by the Evaluation Committee, with two times ‘excellent’, both for scientific quality and relevance to society. We particularly appreciate the way the committee has based its assessment on international benchmarks, and that our work is also praised for reaching beyond the boundaries of narrowly defined area studies. We are equally happy with the score for viability, which reads: ‘The committee rates Viability as 2 rather than 1 [with a view to the challenges connected to the upcoming] change in the leadership of the institute’. The latter, very positive but more cautious assessment reflects a concern that we have discussed extensively in our self-evaluation and have thoroughly debated both with the committee and, on various previous conversations, with the KNAW.

In this reaction, we will focus on the recommendations made by the committee. Recommendation 1 (‘Start sooner than later with procedures for a smooth transition of the upcoming leadership change’) is absolutely valid. We have frequently discussed this issue with the President, Director and also in the biannual PBO meetings. With the help of the KNAW, we have facilitated four mid-career scholars in the institute to advance their managerial skills. One of these four will replace a retiring MT member in 2019.

The committee suggests the option of making an early appointment of a new director, ‘for a few years working together with the current director who would have his hands free to finish a large series of time-demanding projects’. While we – and also I personally as director – welcome this suggestion, we should point out that this option was already extensively discussed with the KNAW in 2017, leading to the conclusion that there was no financial room for this move, nor an urgent need for an early change of directorship. Rather, we feel that the most urgent need is a broadening of the present permanent research staff, which will go down to 12 FTE’s at present to 8 in 2022.

As we have discussed both with the KNAW and the committee, the shrinking size of the permanent staff is the main threat to KITLV’s future viability. This problem was created in 2014 when the Academy imposed a reorganization without leaving the institute a sufficient lump sum. As the report states, we have made a success of the re-invented KITLV nonetheless, but this structural problem has not been solved. So while we fully subscribe to the committee’s conclusion that ‘For the sustainability of the institute it is [...] important that new mid-level permanent staff are appointed’, we emphasize that this will only be possible if the KNAW allows for a structural addition to the present lump sum of M€ 1,17.

Het KITLV is een instituut van de Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (KNAW)
KITLV is an institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW)

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In Recommendation 2, the committee encourages the institute to proceed on new paths that we have chosen in the past years: both studying the impact of the colonial past on contemporary Dutch society, and attention to contemporary environmental issues. We will indeed further develop these strands, and we will heed the advice of the committee to seek collaboration for the latter subject with the Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs of Leiden University's The Hague campus.

In Recommendation 3, the committee suggests that we deepen our collaboration with researchers of Leiden University and specifically suggests the instrument of associated fellowships for LU staff. While we will indeed work towards cementing our cooperation with Leiden University, we should emphasize that as an institute of the KNAW, we have a function as a national as well as international hub, and should therefore make sure not to be seen as focusing exclusively on Leiden University.

The fourth recommendation, to appoint a PhD coordinator, is highly felicitous and we have already taken this suggestion up. We are developing a comprehensive format and one MT member will be responsible for its execution in close cooperation with the PhD council.

Recommendation 5 reads that 'the committee finds it very important that digitization efforts for the collection should be significantly strengthened'. While we do not disagree, we should add that after the reorganization, we were left with no collections of our own, nor specialized staff, nor money for digitization. We have put aside money nonetheless for selective digitization, but this is not a structural fund. Moreover, while we were very successful in obtaining external funding for the digitization of our historical collections prior to the reorganization, we no longer qualify as an applicant as we no longer manage collections ourselves.

We fully subscribe to the committee's sixth and last recommendation, that we should enhance diversity policy. We discussed this extensively both in our self-evaluation and in our conversations with the committee. But again, there will be very limited opportunity to do anything about this without additional KNAW funding for permanent staff. In contrast to the gender and ethnic diversity of our temporary staff, the diversity of our permanent staff is unsatisfactory. But as this segment of the staff is shrinking (see under our remarks at Recommendation 1) and as the first permanent position to be advertised will be in 2019 (researcher, Caribbean) and the next one only in 2022 (Director), there is no way that KITLV will increase the much-desired gender and ethnic diversity anytime soon without significant additional funding.

We are grateful to the evaluation committee for its serious work and assessment of excellence. We cannot but end with an appeal to the Board. In order to implement the recommendations of the committee and to safeguard the long-term sustainability of the KITLV, the institute needs additional funding for mid-level permanent staff. We trust the KNAW will take its responsibility for the institute seriously.

Yours sincerely,

Gert Oostindie
Director

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