

Response from the NIOD academic advisory board to the May 2018 review report

The academic advisory board of the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies has taken note of the findings in the assessment report of the review committee, in which the research of NIOD for the 2012-2017 period was assessed. The academic advisory board concurs with the conclusions and recommendations made to NIOD and expresses its appreciation of the care taken by the review committee in performing its work and the clarity of the reporting.

In this memorandum, the academic advisory board responds briefly to a number of observations and recommendations made by the review committee. In doing so, it follows the three categories that were assessed: 'viability', 'research quality' and 'relevance to society'.

Viability

It comes as no surprise to learn that of the three categories assessed, the 'viability' of NIOD achieved the lowest score. The committee concludes that NIOD has been through a difficult and turbulent period, but it also notes that in recent times, constructive efforts have been made to strengthen the organisation. The report refers to a conflict that 'raged on for a number of years'. The academic advisory board wishes to emphasise that this turbulent period must be considered a closed book and that the images that these words could conjure up now belong to the past.

The review committee appreciates the direction taken following the appointment of a new director. Since his arrival, priority has been given to strengthening the organisation by, for instance, putting clear structures in place and creating a climate in which staff are openly involved in the transformation in progress. The formulation of a long-term vision (strategic agenda) and the associated system of annual programmes means that greater policy-based management has now been introduced. In the opinion of the academic advisory board, these reforms are an effective starting point in helping to define objectives at the various levels of organisation, programmes and individual staff members, as advocated by the review committee, and also in enlarging the output control (by means of reinforcing profiles, annual plans, annual interviews, etc.). The strengthening of the NIOD internal organisation and the further expansion of programme-based research infrastructures will continue to require a great deal of attention and energy in the near future. On the basis of the new direction taken, the academic advisory board is confident that the efforts will benefit research quality and output and that as a result, the breeding ground for the risks of complacency and introspection referred to by the review committee will be contained.

The review committee endorses the added value of NIOD as an institute that combines research with managing collections, but asserts that it is also important that NIOD makes this added value more explicit. The academic advisory board agrees with this recommendation and will consider this constructively with the NIOD management.

Research quality

The research quality is assessed as 'very good' and the committee report makes several observations that are useful and practicable for the further reinforcement of the position of NIOD in the international field of research. The research is incorporated in three programmes ('genocide & holocaust', 'war & society' and 'societal research'). The review committee concludes that a discrepancy exists regarding focus and ambition between the 'genocide programme' and the 'war & society programme'. But it also has an eye and appreciation for the recent measures intended to increase cohesion in the research of 'war & society' and to develop a more programme-based approach. The decolonisation research is a clear example of this. The review committee's proposal to change the name of the 'societal research' programme, which it finds difficult to place, into 'public history' is in the opinion of the academic advisory board a worthwhile suggestion. It also fits in with the strategy of communicating more clearly that the 'societal research' programme maintains the same quality standards as the other programmes.

The review committee makes a number of comments regarding the lack of a clear publication strategy by NIOD. The academic advisory board endorses the importance of formulating such a strategy. However, steps should be taken to avoid the debate about this being narrowed down to the language of publication. By requiring, for instance, that every book published in Dutch must be accompanied at least by an English-language article, the reach and impact of the research would be significantly increased.

The review committee comments that there is a problem with declining financing (indirect funding). The EHRI project is a positive exception. The academic advisory board considers it important to emphasise that as a small organisation, NIOD must look for funding possibilities particularly in a programme-based and strategic manner. The efforts required to compete for indirect funding compared with the likelihood of a proposal being granted are often far removed.

In the opinion of the academic advisory board, the term 'contract research' summons up the wrong associations, and prefers to refer to 'external financing'. The academic advisory board therefore sees externally financed research (e.g. the Indonesia/decolonisation research) as an equally important and fully-fledged form of financing for scientific research.

The review committee advocates reinforcing the PhD programme. The academic advisory board underlines that it must be clear how PhD candidates will be supervised within the structures of NIOD and the universities, but that setting up a separate structure would be going too far.

Relevance to society

The review committee assesses the relevance as excellent. That excellence is expressed in many of the NIOD activities. The challenge for the next few years will be to maintain that excellent relevance. This will be possible only by continuing to innovate. The review committee are pleasantly surprised about the dynamic relationship that NIOD has developed with the public in some projects, in which co-creation possibilities are explored. The positive assessment is an incentive to continue experimenting in this direction.

Finally, the review committee makes a comment relating to the academic advisory board: 'A specific suggestion that the committee would like to offer is to measure the academic advisory board against the yardstick of diversity and – if necessary – appoint additional members'. Diversity in all its facets is an important point of attention and the academic advisory board has welcomed two new members in recent months. As a result, the diversity has been increased in several aspects (spread of relevant disciplines, gender and age). In the next few months, several long-serving members will be standing down and that will offer another opportunity to increase diversity even further in the composition of the academic advisory board.

Amsterdam, 15 June 2018.

Prof. Charles Jeurgens (chair), Dr Liesbeth van de Grift, Prof. Larissa van den Herik,
Prof. Susan Legêne, Prof. Bruno de Winter.