



K O N I N K L I J K E N E D E R L A N D S E
A K A D E M I E V A N W E T E N S C H A P P E N

**POSITION OF THE BOARD OF THE ROYAL NETHERLANDS
ACADEMY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES (KNAW) REGARDING THE
2018 SEP EVALUATION OF THE NETHERLANDS INSTITUTE OF
ECOLOGY (NIOO)**

The board and director of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) are pleased with the positive outcome of the external evaluation of the Netherlands Institute of Ecology (NIOO), chaired by Professor Corné Pieterse. The evaluation committee rated the institute's research quality, relevance to society and viability all as *excellent*. The KNAW board would like to express its gratitude to the members of the evaluation committee for their extensive and thorough work and their valuable recommendations. The KNAW board is confident that NIOO management will use these advices in order to help sustain the excellent level of performance. Below the KNAW board will share its views on the committee's main recommendations. In formulating its position the board also took into consideration the reactions of the NIOO management and the NIOO Scientific Advisory Board to the research assessment report.

When the research assessment report is quoted, text is shown in italics

1. Quality, impact, and viability of NIOO

a. Added value

The board agrees with the committee's view that NIOO should continue to focus on *basic science as this is a key component of the institute's uniqueness*. The board considers NIOO's fundamental research and long term studies as one its distinguishing strengths. The committee encouraged NIOO *to lead novel research fields and pursue high-risk, high-gain projects, and to be thematically open-minded when it comes to recruiting new NIOO staff members*. The board supports the notion that the cross-departmental research themes further improve NIOO's responsiveness to new scientific and societal developments. The balance between thematic approaches and being thematically open-minded is relevant and will require future ongoing discussions at the institute. With support of the KNAW board, NIOO plans to make full use of the extensive version of their international benchmark analysis, *comparing itself to similar institutes around the world and determining its unique selling point compared to these institutes* in further developing its strategy and in formulating solid external narratives. The board suggests that this analysis could also help NIOO to strategically reinforce its international network of collaborators and its international position.

b. Knowledge utilization

The report stated *that the societal relevance of NIOO research is indisputable and the committee recognises and applauds the institute's efforts to reach out to societal stakeholders, most notably the general public, industry, and policy makers*. The KNAW board also attaches importance to the societal relevance of research and values NIOO's outreach activities. The board endorses the committee's recommendation to develop *a more cohesive, strategic approach including a clear external narrative in order to avoid spreading its research translation efforts too thinly*. It is the strong opinion of the board that NIOO should pay special attention to intensify collaborations with industry as part of this strategy. The committee also advised *to establish a Societal Relevance Advisory Board in addition to the Scientific Advisory Board*. The board acknowledges the value of advice from societal stakeholders and will follow the suggestion of NIOO's Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) to incorporate one or two additional external members to the SAB and to expand the tasks of the SAB accordingly. This is consistent with the policy of some other Academy institutes and with the notion that the knowledge utilisation strategy should be closely linked to the research strategy. The board recommends that the extended SAB, or the core members thereof, will visit the institute on a more regular basis.

2. Structure and size

The board is pleased to read the committee's view that *the institute's current size is satisfactory....that the separation from the Dutch sea researchers (working at NIOZ) seems to be a natural division of science fieldsand that the committee applauds the establishment of the seven research themes*. The board expects that the themes will contribute to the vibrant research culture at NIOO by stimulating collaborations between

departments and junior and senior staff. The board supports the committee's recommendations on the evaluation and further development of the research themes and the response of the NIOO management to these. The board recognises the remark made by committee about the *somewhat rigid departmental structure*. The new director will be assigned the task to revise and modernise this structure.

3. Personnel planning

The committee proposed several recommendations related to human resource management including the succession of NIOO's Director Professor Louise Vet. The committee urges the KNAW to start the formal search for a new Director as soon as possible, preferably at least two years in advance, because this is a challenging position which will take considerable time to fill. The board already agreed with the current director, Professor Louise Vet, that the procedure to recruit her successor would start 18 months before her retirement. This will therefore be one of the priorities in the upcoming period and the KNAW-board will take a coordinating role in this. A profile is currently being drafted and an Appointments Advisory Committee is being formed in accordance with the Academy's protocol for the recruitment and appointment of institute directors. This includes using the Academy's and NIOO's *extensive network to identify potential top candidates*. The upcoming retirement of both the institute director and a department head, gives NIOO flexibility to embrace new research themes and to steer the institute towards new directions in order to further enhance the strong reputation of the department and NIOO as a whole. To take full advantage of this opportunity, the recruitment for these two positions should be a coordinated effort. In addition, the board suggests the NIOO to consider scientific leadership from a broader perspective and continue to work on leadership development at all levels.

4. Financial policy:

In agreement with the committee's anticipation, the board expects that *NIOO will experience a stronger incentive to apply for external money in the future*. The board thanks the committee for its valuable recommendations for measures to ensure the long-term financial viability of NIOO. As the committee rightfully remarked, the Academy has *recently established a Knowledge Transfer Office which offers some grant support*; however, the central grant support office mostly offers basic administrative support and lacks the domain-specific expertise suggested by the committee. The coming period NIOO should determine which additional support is mostly needed and in which ways this can be arranged. Appointing a *dedicated grant support officer* will be one of the options to consider. Alternative measures could also be envisaged, including training programmes where staff members offer mutual support to increase awareness and help each other improving funding applications. Additionally, it would seem important that the successors of the Director and the department head will have a considerable track record in acquisition of external funds and will be able to inspire and sustain an active grant writing culture in the institute.

5. PhD programme

The board endorses the committee's recommendations with respect to the PhD programme and NIOO's response such as preparing students *for the next steps in their careers and ensuring that all PhD students have an external supervisor*.

6. Research integrity and open science

The board is pleased to read the positive comments from the committee on NIOO's measures *to safeguard research integrity*. The board agrees with the committee that all staff members should be well aware of these and trusts NIOO to take appropriate measures to improve the internal communication on this important topic. With regard to open science, the Academy understands that the committee and NIOO management may have *concerns about the increasing costs of facilitating open science*. For this reason the Academy is an active member of the National Platform for Open Science consisting of ten knowledge organisations. Concerns such as the costs associated with open science and the role of publishers, are among the issues that the platform addresses.

7. Diversity and inclusiveness

The board endorses the remarks made by both the committee and NIOO management stating that *NIOO takes diversity and inclusiveness seriously* and that the *mentoring scheme for female scientists* contributes to this. Diversity and inclusiveness will also be taken into account in the recruitment of a new Director.

Amsterdam, July 2018