

## Evaluation of the Data Archiving and Networked Services (DANS)

*Joint statement by the executive boards of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) in response to the evaluation of DANS*

The boards and management of KNAW and NWO are pleased to respond to the report of the evaluation committee, chaired by professor Hooimeijer, that visited DANS in November 2017. In formulating this response they also took into account the remarks made by the DANS management (March 23, 2018) and the Scientific Advisory Board of DANS (March 23, 2018). The boards of KNAW and NWO express their gratitude to the evaluation committee, the DANS management and the Scientific Advisory Board for their extensive work, and constructive suggestions. The text below sequentially discusses the recommendations of the evaluation committee. Finally, it will briefly comment on the evaluation scores provided by the evaluation committee.

**1. The first recommendation is about the role of DANS in the SSH domain. The committee recommends that DANS further develops and continues to guard DANS's strong home base in this domain. This can be done by identifying key stakeholders in this community, strengthening the network here and by making sure that stakeholders are always the starting point of DANS's activities.**

Both the boards of KNAW and NWO agree with the positions of the DANS management and the Scientific Advisory Board that SSH must remain the home base and the main constituency of DANS. The institute's main strengths in providing data management services is firmly rooted in the SSH home base. DANS thus possesses a unique position nationally, which is of crucial importance to the development of the SSH scientific disciplines in the Netherlands. At the same time it is recognized that there is an increasing demand from other disciplines (e.g. life sciences). There are opportunities for DANS to expand its services and expertise to a broader scientific community and to explore collaboration internationally. Expansion to other domains and international collaboration should thus be sought, but with initial focus on disciplines that are closely connected to the DANS core expertise, capitalising on the strong expertise rooted in the SSH domain. A leading paradigm in strategic decision making should be complementarity of expertise compared to other data management service providers. Key stakeholders should indeed be involved from the start of DANS's activities.

**2. Secondly, the committee thinks it is important to develop more explicit ideas about DANS's aspired position in the rapidly changing data landscape (e.g. international focus points, life sciences, rise of big data and technologies like block chain). This is in particular relevant when it comes to support services in applying the FAIR data principles.**

The boards of KNAW and NWO acknowledge that the data landscape is, and will remain, complex and dynamic. Given DANS's relatively small budget, a strong vision, flexibility and sharp choices are essential. This is an additional reason for DANS to explore further collaboration with complementary partners, and to team up in a more coordinated effort with other partners in the field. The boards agree with the evaluation committee that there is room to make choices on the areas in which DANS would like to take the lead nationally and internationally.

In addition, the evaluation committee noted that data archiving is becoming more distributed. A shift towards expert support of data stewardship (encompassing the professional treatment of data throughout all stages of research), rather than data archiving as such, might provide more added value to researchers and might place DANS at the forefront of the international data landscape. Since other stakeholders have started a programme for education and training of data-stewards,

DANS should continue teaming up with these stakeholders to ensure agreement on data stewardship expertise and implementation. The boards of KNAW and NWO invite the DANS management to continue its strategic planning along these lines and develop more explicit ideas, taking strong notion of the user perspective.

**3. The committee recommends to rethink the current governance structure of DANS with a dual headed Steering Committee from both NWO and KNAW.**

The governance structure of DANS is a relevant and timely issue, particularly in view of the fact that the national and international landscape in this area is complex, diverse and rapidly changing. Even though the DANS management and the Scientific Advisory Board explicitly stated that the governance structure as an independent institute under dual management of KNAW and NWO has functioned appropriately from the foundation of the institute in 2005, it is pertinent to ask whether this current governance structure provides optimal future perspectives.

The boards of KNAW and NWO will start discussions on the DANS governance, based on a series of alternative scenarios provided by the DANS management. These discussions about the governance of DANS overlap in time with the portfolio evaluation of the KNAW and NWO institutes. The boards of KNAW and NWO choose to wait for the results of the portfolio evaluation before taking position on the governance of DANS.

**4. The committee recommends that DANS implements a sounding board for EASY, which could also advise on the establishment of communities of users of specific data collections.**

**5. In tandem to the previous point, the committee advises to increase the presence and visibility of DANS at universities and thus to strengthen networks with key stakeholders.**

**6. Link up with the university libraries, in order to facilitate their efforts in supporting local researchers to make data FAIR, to develop shared standards, and to profit from the distributed storage of data at local institutions.**

**7. The committee recommends turning towards the user perspective more in the upcoming years. This entails identifying current and potential users of DANS's core services and investigating their experiences with DANS. The committee believes more attention should go to those users who wish to re-use the data that has been uploaded to DANS.**

Recommendations 4-7 are jointly addressed. The Scientific Advisory Board explicitly advised to implement a sounding board for EASY. The vision of the DANS management regarding this recommendation was less explicit; it stated that the existing Scientific Advisory Board currently already partly fulfils this role. It noted the diversity and importance of the user's perspective and mentioned recent efforts to increase the interaction with users.

The KNAW and NWO boards underline the importance of the users' perspective but do not *a priori* agree with the evaluation committee that establishing a sounding board for EASY is the only way to achieve this. The boards thus invite the management of DANS to develop a strategy in conjunction with the Scientific Advisory Board to increase the interaction with the users, taking into account current and future developments in the types of services, and the notion that the users' perspective may increase visibility and contribute to the establishment of user communities. Additionally, DANS should continue to communicate and explain its own position to key stakeholders, thus increasing its presence and visibility at universities and non-university research institutes, strengthening networks with these key stakeholders and its leading role in data management policy development.

**8. Finally the committee believes it is important to continue to seek opportunities for collaboration with academic partners, visiting professors and PhD's working on topics related to DANS services. The field of data science is rapidly expanding and if DANS wants to**

**remain at the international forefront in the development of data services in-depth knowledge of innovations is required.**

The evaluation committee was impressed by the scientific output of the Research and Innovation group of DANS, and stated that there is a good balance between services and research. The boards of KNAW and NWO take note of these positive remarks and conclude that the research at DANS adequately supports future developments in the core services of DANS.

The boards emphasise that service provision remains the prime function of DANS; the research activities are essential to sustain quality and innovation in these services and should be aimed primarily at achieving that objective, as is currently the case.

**Evaluation and scores provided by the evaluation committee**

The boards of KNAW and NWO are pleased with the positive and constructive evaluation of the institute, as evidenced by the "very good" scores received for all three evaluation criteria. The boards also take note of the remark made by the evaluation committee, which was further underscored by the DANS management, that the SEP-criteria (which are primarily aimed at research institutes focussed on fundamental research) are not fully applicable to DANS given its relatively large service provision and relatively small research program. This nuance led to the conclusion that the criteria had been applied very strictly, thus valuing the "very good" scores even higher than in the previous evaluation. These scores thus likely provide a realistic and balanced evaluation of the institute, also in view of the fact that a status of "world leading" (necessary for the SEP score "excellent") is almost impossible to achieve for a service institute in this rapidly developing international field. At the same time these scores leave room for improvement. Notably, DANS finds itself in a strong position to join forces nationally and internationally and thus develop towards a world leading data management service organisation. The boards and management of KNAW and NWO trust that DANS will make efforts to successfully implement these recommendations.

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