



Reaction of the LIAS management team to the research review of LIAS 2012-2017

0. Introduction

We would like to start by thanking the members of the committee for giving so generously of their time and attention. We think that on the whole the research review is a fair assessment of where we are as an institute and that the recommendations made will be very helpful for the further development of the institute. We note that where the committee awards the scores of “world class/excellent” or “very good”, this is for achievements in fields where the institute and its members are the only, or the main actors, while on the other hand where it deems the situation “unsatisfactory”, besides the remarks of the committee concerning the research strategy which we will elaborate on below, this concerns areas where the institute is almost entirely dependent on external developments. The concerns of the committee largely coincide with our own, and we are therefore thankful that the committee emphasizes the need to improve the financial and organizational environment in which LIAS has to operate. This is clearly a broader concern in the field of the Humanities in The Netherlands.

1. Research

LIAS is a research institute and research is its core business. Hence, the qualification “world class/excellent” awarded by the committee is deeply gratifying. The committee states that “members of the institute are producing world-class research on a wide range of relevant research topics.” The institute’s proven ability to attract funding from competitive external sources (33 grants in five years) is characterized as “very impressive.” Although credit for these achievements should first of all go to our researchers, we feel that the institute’s policies are also a major factor. We therefore reject the notion (on page 10 of the review) that LIAS “currently does not have any formulated research strategy.” We therefore interpret the remarks of the committee as a recommendation to make the current bottom-up strategy of the institute more explicit.

As we explained in our original self-assessment, the current MT opts for strengthening the “bottom-up” approach to research policy that has been a tradition at LIAS. This takes two forms: firstly, facilitating, supporting and encouraging individual initiatives for grant applications (among other things through teaching relief, but also through organizing feedback sessions) and secondly, facilitating, supporting, and encouraging the growth of disciplinary or theme-based networks that transcend the area-based divisions within the institute. The committee “happily acknowledges the splendid success of the bottom-up approach in the so-called networks” yet argues for more strategic research planning on the part of the management team.

We think that imposing a top-down research strategy, without implying that this is necessarily what the committee has in mind, with the attendant prioritization, on such a diverse community as LIAS would be a grave mistake. It is precisely the bottom-up approach that has yielded the extraordinary success in the field of



Blad 2/4

research that LIAS has achieved. But “bottom-up” should not be confused with passivity. Supporting and perfecting grant applications and helping build the networks is an active policy with a proven track record. It is our ambition increasingly to bring these two aspects together, in the sense that we are stimulating the networks to become platforms for larger, group-based, grant applications that transcend the areas. To allow us to work more closely with the networks in this, we are strengthening the networks by offering assistantships to the chairs and we plan to convene them for consultations on LIAS research policy.

Interdisciplinarity is, of course, a means not an end, and should be applied where needed. Some of the largest research projects within LIAS are already interdisciplinary in the sense that they combine history, traditional philology, digital humanities, archeology and art history.

2. Societal relevance

The committee notes that the institute takes its societal obligations seriously and awards a score of “very good” in this area. It also notes quite correctly that, whether in a more traditional form like textbooks and teaching materials or in more novel ones like blogs and websites, the “impressive and growing” contribution to society is largely based on individual initiatives of LIAS members.

The LIAS MT recognizes that this is the case and that there is a need for a more pro-active policy in this realm, but that is more generally the case in the humanities. That is why steps are already being taken at the faculty and even university level to increase the societal impact of humanities research.

It has to be recognized, however, that there are two distinct issues that both go under the label “societal relevance” or “impact.” On the one hand the relevance of existing research and expertise (which, as the committee notes, in the case of LIAS, is evident) has to be made more visible to society at large. That is an area, where a more active policy on the part of the institute and the faculty may be expected to yield results. On the other, the actual demand from society (primarily from the media) for information and analysis has to be matched with the existing expertise. Here the communication department at faculty level can be of assistance. However it must be recognised that this is much harder to do, as media demands are often very specific and have great urgency.

To improve the score of “very good” to “excellent” in the coming five years, the LIAS MT will develop an impact strategy together with the other institutes in the humanities faculty, make “impact” explicitly part of the portfolio of one of the MT members and install a permanent committee on visibility in the institute.

3. Viability

The committee recognizes that after the breakdown of trust and internal relations in 2017, the MT and the Advisory Council together “have done remarkable work in restoring relationships, building channels of communication, and creating more



Blad 3/4

transparency in decision making.” (p. 9), but it also warns that there are a number of factors that threaten the position of LIAS as a world-class research institute. That is why it awards the score of “unsatisfactory” in this area. It has to be noted that these factors relate to a more general problem in the Humanities in The Netherlands.

The MT thinks that the committee correctly identifies the factors that could threaten LIAS’s position and further development (apart from the committee’s take on bottom-up versus top-down research policy, where we beg to differ).

The problem, as we see it, is that the factors the committee identifies as threats are beyond the control of the institute or its management, apart from the observations regarding the research strategy, as discussed above.

The committee notes that teaching loads have grown to levels that seem to be unsustainable. This is true, and it is a direct effect of the fact that funding of Dutch universities is on the basis of student registrations. While student enrollment in Dutch universities has gone up significantly over the past decade (with more than 25 %) budgets have not kept pace and staff has been growing at a much slower rate.

While it is not the case that members with a research assignment can face a situation in which teaching take up 100% of their time, the pressure of teaching is undeniably heavy. LIAS guarantees 20 % research time, but that is on a yearly basis and during the teaching semesters there is very little time for research.

This problem is directly linked to another that the committee is concerned about: the inequality between the 10 percent of researchers who have big grants and the 90 percent who have not. The paucity of research time in the regular university positions makes for excessive dependence on external grant funding and as the success rates of these competitive grant programmes is between 10 and 15 % even excellent researchers often lose out. We concur that it is indeed very important that we make sure that important research areas are not lost either because of low student demand or because of lack of success in grant applications. One very valuable instrument to create more research time for LIAS members, the “profile areas”, was unfortunately terminated by the university as from this year.

As the committee notes (page 9) to remedy the problem of the teaching loads and to create more space for research across the board, a way will have to be found to make the teaching programmes less labour-intensive, for instance by reducing the number of courses or the number of theses. We fully agree with this analysis. Indeed, we have been trying to convince the programmes of this reality, as the committee also recommends. LIAS has no power to enforce change in this area, however. The committee notes that “LIAS is not fully in control of its own teaching” but that is an understatement: although LIAS is responsible for the staffing of the teaching programmes, it is NOT in control of teaching as such and



Blad 4/4

there is no category that can be designated *its own* (i.e. the research institute's) teaching, but the institute is of course more than ready to work with the faculty board in solving these faculty-wide problems. That having been said, it should be noted that the staff members are involved in shaping the programmes, and involved in the management of the teaching programmes, be it not under the responsibility of the institute.

The committee "considers the large degree of separation of the responsibility for research and teaching between LIAS and the BA programmes [and MA programmes as well, we might add] as highly unusual internationally and as unsustainable." We agree that this structure is highly problematical, but as it is the cornerstone of the way the faculty of humanities is organized, we as an institute are not in a position to change it.

Finally, we agree with the committee that there is a need to explain more fully the Dutch university system works in terms of career development as particularly for our colleagues who join us from countries outside western Europe, this system may be opaque.

4. The PhD programme

The committee notes that since the last assessment "much has been done to improve the situation and that a change of culture has been successfully established." It commends the range of new initiatives that are being put in place and recommends that better communication be put in place about the opportunities available to the PhD students, and that PhD students, especially "external" or non-funded ones, be more involved in the research and teaching of LIAS.

All these points are high on the agenda in the work the MT is doing together with the PhD programme director and manager to establish a solid *LIAS* PhD "school" within the faculty's graduate school. That work is progressing very well, as the PhD students have noted, but we recognize (and indeed have stated as much in our self-evaluation) that the development of the PhD programme was seriously delayed by the internal upheaval of 2017 and has to make up for lost time. Much tighter procedures for admission, supervision and coursework have now been put in place and we make every effort at communicating these to the PhD candidates. Also, the university has established stricter rules on PhD courses.

The opportunities for teaching by PhD candidates have recently been enlarged through the introduction of tutorials to support large lecture classes in the BA. In total, some thirty tutorials will be given by PhD students. It is not correct that external PhD candidates are not allowed to teach. Many of them do teach, but they are given a separate part-time contract to so.