

“Staalgelden”: What are they and what are they for?

In all discussions on the position of Middle East- and Asian Studies in the Netherlands, a reference will sooner or later be made to the “Staalgelden” (Staal funds). As even the recent past risks being a foreign country to new generations of academics, especially when it is a Dutch past and the Netherlands is a foreign country to many of our colleagues anyway, it is perhaps useful to explain briefly what these mysterious “Staalgelden” are.

The term refers to the Dutch Sanskrit scholar and philosopher Frits Staal (1930-2012). From Berkeley, where he had been professor since 1968, Staal wrote an open letter in Dutch newspapers in 1990, deploring the way cuts in higher education in the eighties had left the field of “oriental studies” in the Netherlands weakened. He called upon the minister of education to stop the rot and reverse the trend. As a result he was invited to head a commission of enquiry into the matter. In 1991 that commission presented its report – “Baby Krishna” - demanding an earmarked investment on a national level in the strengthening of Middle East- and Asian Studies. The argument was that these fields were of huge cultural and academic importance, that the Netherlands had an old tradition and an outstanding reputation in the fields and that they could not be expected to fund themselves out of student numbers.

The minister adopted Staal’s proposals. Extra money was made available to the universities, who, in turn, promised to maintain these fields at their current strength. Another outcome of Staal’s intervention was the creation of the IIAS as the Dutch leg of a European network of Asian Studies institutes. That is a different story, however.

In 1995 the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences was asked by the ministry to investigate whether the universities were keeping their side of the bargain. A commission was duly installed and this “commissie-Zürcher” (not me, incidentally, but my father who was professor of east Asian history in Leiden from 1961 to 1993) reported that the universities were, on the whole true to their word.

For 2000 a second review was scheduled but it did not take place, because the ministry announced that the Staalgelden would no longer be earmarked – they would still be awarded, but now simply as part of the lumpsum of the universities.

From then on, it was entirely up to the universities whether to maintain an interest in Middle East and Asian Studies or not. As was perhaps to be expected, those universities who did not see these fields as central to their profile soon started to make cuts when money was scarce. This happened in Nijmegen, Tilburg, Utrecht and Groningen, and to a certain extent in Amsterdam (at both universities). Leiden was – and is – the exception.

Because of its strong tradition in oriental studies, Leiden had always been the main beneficiary of the “Staalgelden.” Originally it received 2.9 million (in Euros). To this day the university, when it sets out the financial cadre for the next year, allocates extra money to the Faculty of Humanities to maintain these fields.

Here a careful distinction needs to be made between the commitment in fte’s and that in money. Originally, Staal – and the ministry – guaranteed a certain number of fte’s for a number of fields, of which there was – and is – an exhaustive list. The larger of these fields – like Chinese language and culture, or Arabic language and culture – were guaranteed a minimum of 4.5 fte; smaller ones – like Korean, Hebrew or Turkish language and culture were guaranteed 2.0 fte. This commitment in fte’s still figures in the faculty’s yearly budget.

It is important to note what exactly the commitment is for. The original Staalreport, on the basis of which the money was granted, was explicitly about the *study of languages and cultures*, as these were the fields that could not be maintained on the basis of student numbers

(even then). In fact: this was the reason social scientists working on Asia were immediately up in arms to demand their own special funding (in the Report van den Muyzenberg).

Our language and culture programmes of the nineteen nineties have long since been transformed into area studies programmes, which combine study of languages and cultures with that of societies, economies, politics and international relations. What that means for LIAS now is that, if we are to remain true to the spirit of the original plan, the guarantee should be understood as covering only part of the staffing of our current programmes – the part that focuses on language and culture and that attracts (on the whole) fewer students. In Staal's day, language acquisition and "content" courses that made use of material in the source languages were not as strictly separated as they are now, but as language acquisition was included then, it would seem logical to maintain that the same applies now.

Now to the money. That is an entirely different story. After 2000 the money was no longer earmarked and in Leiden that gave rise to a protracted conflict within the Faculty of Humanities on the question where that money should go – or where it had gone. In those days the faculty was split into a "western" and a "non-western" part. The latter had originally been a separate sub-faculty, but by the nineties was represented by CNWS, the Centre for Non-Western Studies.

CNWS fought hard but ultimately lost the battle. Of the 2.9 million (in Euros) that the faculty had originally received, 1.3 million was used to change the allocation system, allowing for a better staff-student ration in non-western studies. 1.6 million remained specifically in the budget as "Staalgeld" by 2000. Later several rounds of cuts meant that by 2005 that money had been halved.

In the meantime the situation that had triggered the original intervention by Staal – important humanities fields that threatened to disappear because they could not be funded from student numbers - was no longer confined to the study of Asia and the Middle East. Many other language and culture programmes (German, Russian, Italian, Portuguese, etc.) were now under threat and yet another KNAW commission was tasked with reporting on the problem. The commission-Gerritsen, chaired by the famed Utrecht mediaevalist Wim Gerritsen, in 2002 brought out the report "Vensters op de Wereld." On the Staalgeld, the commission noted that these still existed and it called on all universities to fulfil their commitment, allocate the money and index it for inflation.

This has not happened, or only happened in part. Instead, the discussion focused on collaboration and division of labour between the different faculties in so-called "sector plans." This did not prevent faculties from making unilateral decisions, as when Utrecht abolished Persian and Turkish, which led to the transfer of two colleagues to Leiden, or when Nijmegen changed Middle East Studies into Islam Studies and transferred it to the Faculty of Divinity. Currently LIAS receives almost 1.5 million Euros under the heading "Staalgeld." It has to be remembered that the original commitment was one on the part of the university, which has been transferred to the faculty. LIAS is the main beneficiary of this money (and the main executor of the commitments!) but not the only institute involved. LUCL in particular is also involved, with smaller amounts going to LUIH and LUCAS as the following overview shows:

Staalgelden		2020	financiële bijdrage om de minimale formatie mogelijk te maken (€ * 1000)				
Gegarandeerd basisaantal			LUCL	LUCAS	LU IH	LIAS	Totaal
Indiaans Amerika		2,0	89,9	-	-	-	89,9
VIET		2,0	89,9	-	-	-	89,9
Afrikaans		4,5	112,3	44,9	44,9	-	202,2
Egyptologie		2,0	-	-	-	89,9	89,9
Assyriologie		2,0	-	-	-	89,9	89,9
Hebreeuws		2,0	22,5	-	-	67,4	89,9
Zuid-Aziëstudies		4,5	-	-	-	202,2	202,2
Zuidoost Aziëstudies		4,5	22,5	-	-	179,7	202,2
Korea		2,0	-	-	-	89,9	89,9
Rusland en Slavisch		4,5	112,3	44,9	44,9	-	202,2
Arabisch		4,5	22,5	-	-	179,7	202,2
Perzisch		2,0	-	-	-	89,9	89,9
Turks		2,0	-	-	-	89,9	89,9
China		4,5	11,2	-	-	190,9	202,2
Japan		4,5	11,2	-	-	190,9	202,2
Totaal		47,5	494,2	89,9	89,9	1.460,1	2.134,0

It is important to note that the commitment is in fte's only – it does not say anything about the mix of ranks or the existence of chairs in a field. When we put the commitment in terms of fte's and the money allocated in the budget side by side, it is immediately clear that the money covers at best 50 percent of the costs of the guaranteed fte's.

What that means – and that is the bottom line – is that while LIAS is committed to do its part to make sure that the study of Middle Eastern and Asian *languages and cultures* has a secure base in the future, the actual financial situation means that also in these sectors funding from EC's and from acquisition of research grants will remain essential to achieving this end.

– Erik-Jan Zürcher, April 2020