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Evaluation of the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage

Final Report



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Management summary

This evaluation report presents the findings of Technopolis Group in the evaluation of the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA), one of the Federal Scientific Institutes (FSIs) of Belgium. Technopolis Group performed the evaluation in the period April 2016 - June 2017, upon commission by the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office (BELSPO).

The objective of the evaluation was an integral assessment of the scientific, service and collection functions of KIK-IRPA. The evaluation was based upon a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods; a key component was the review by a panel of international experts.

Background

KIK-IRPA was established in 1948 to perform research and provide services in what has become the realm of heritage science. The institute has a 7-fold mission given by royal decree:

1. Development of an inventory of works of (digital) photography
2. Management of documentation on scientific and technical data related to the patrimony
3. Valorisation and international dissemination of data
4. Research on Belgian arts, materials and techniques applied in art
5. Monitoring and development of conservation materials and techniques
6. The conservation and treatment of properties, and support to related initiatives
7. Active participation in national and international scientific projects and conferences

The way the institute works is best described by this quote from an interview with the management:

Our core business is to identify the best ways, in terms of techniques and materials to perform conservation and restoration in a historically just context. This can be translated into publications, protocols, methods and tools and advisory services, and subsequently be executed – though the latter should have least priority.

Researchers at the institute depart from (mostly Belgian) cultural objects for study and treatment, derived from various sources: federal Belgium, the Communities and Regions, churches and private collections. Such activities are performed in multidisciplinary teams and in partnerships with clients and other (research) institutions.

Internal governance structure and management

KIK-IRPA is organised in four operational departments: Documentation, Laboratories, Conservation/Restauration and Valorisation/Communication. All these departments have various subsections, including specific laboratories and restoration/conservation units, some of them very small and depending on one or two key-persons only.

Financial management

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KIK-IRPA has four main sources of income. The largest source is the BELSPO staff envelope, which is budget specifically allocated for staff. In 2015, it amounted to M€4.68. Other income comes from the BELSPO general dotation: a lump sum received from BELSPO for operational costs (M€2.37); direct services income (M€1.89) and project income (M€1.42). Since 2008 total income increased, especially through growth of services income. Over the years expenditure increased as well, especially because of increasing staff costs (for staff not paid from the staff envelope). Income and expenditure have, over the years, been more or less in balance. In 2015 expenditure was 923,525 euro less than the income generated that year. This is, at least partially, caused by austerity measures, placing all government services, including FSI, under stringent spending controls.

The federal funding alone is not sufficient to sustain the laboratories and their units. External research financing and (paid) service provision have therefore become a necessity for KIK-IRPA. At the moment 1/3 of total income (including staff envelope) of KIK-IRPA is external, so to safeguard (or even extend) this for the future is crucial for sustainability of KIK-IRPA.

HRM

Over the years 2008-2015 KIK-IRPA had approximately 140 staff (120-125 FTE). After a slight decrease since 2008 in 2015 staff went up again, because of amongst others an increase in service income. The largest group are contractual scientists, followed by statutory scientists. The total number of contractual support staff now outnumbers the number of statutory support staff. KIK-IRPA has more female staff; amongst the scientists 75% of the staff is constituted of women.

The Director General and the Heads of departments all have *ad interim* positions. There is insufficient budget (made) available to appoint statutory Directors. The interim status of the directors hampers the management of the ODs, e.g. as directors *ad interim* have no formal mandate to develop a management plan.

As will be concluded, KIK-IRPA is in urgent need of a renewed strategy. This demands a change in HR management and employment policy. The federal government should facilitate increased autonomy in HR for the institute.

Research

The most distinctive characteristic of the research activities of KIK-IRPA is that research is carried out in a multidisciplinary way between art historians, conservators and scientists all working for the same national institution. There are few international institutions of comparable size that work in such a collaborative way. This multidisciplinary collaboration is exemplary and has been greatly to the benefit of the quality of research and the subsequent publications.

Over the years, KIK-IRPA has developed clearly visible areas of strengths and, across the whole field of science, the Institute demonstrated high to outstanding scientific qualities. These form the basis for the Institute's long-lasting reputation. Most units are well-equipped, and have passionate and well-educated staff.

Although most of the research of the Institute is of good to excellent quality, and although there is lots of internal cooperation, the possible strategic synergies between the research areas are not well explored, and various areas of research are close to their minimum size or below critical mass. This is not sustainable, unless additional sources of income are generated at short notice. Since no increase in basic funding is expected and additional (commercial) income is not easily generated, this requires internal restructuring, based on a balanced research strategy.

The research lines mentioned in KIK-IRPA's strategy and self-evaluation are broad, and the review team has the impression that it is the evolution over time that has governed current priorities/activities within the scientific research programs. The recent choices in research appear to

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be driven more by current researchers' scientific strongholds/capabilities or personal ambitions (often based on very valid national or international networks) than on a clear institutional strategy.

The broad range of publications presented during the review is impressive but the impact of the publications is not clear. For example, the bibliometric analysis from 2005/2015-16 shows that although a growth in the number of articles over this ten year period can be reported, the citations per article shows a negative growth. This suggests a fall in impact of research activities of KIK-IRPA.

Within KIK-IRPA the applied research and single cases take a great deal of time, and are of good quality. There is much cooperation between different areas of research but there is no real synthesis of the results of the research at a more basic level. In general, fundamental problems within the scientific research of cultural heritage seem to receive less attention at KIK-IRPA than applied research, though successful examples were abundant. However, it is only fundamental research that widens the horizon, and moves the borders of applied research, which we judge is the best role for a national institution.

In various areas KIK-IRPA has a good working relation with Belgian universities. Most of them result from individual initiatives of KIK-IRPA staff, there is no overarching cooperation strategy.

International contacts and networks of KIK-IRPA are fairly well developed. Within this aspect, the participation within ICCROM is worth noticing, where KIK-IRPA has traditionally a member in the Council. These connections are clearly visible on a daily basis and within the European Projects where KIK-IRPA is involved (e.g. CHARISMA, now IPERION CH, Europeana, ERIHS.EU, etc.). However, the impact of European initiatives should not be overestimated: the budget received from European projects is small, and most initiatives are not sustainable after project subsidies have run out. International networks outside the European projects offer common standards and a complementary approach regarding scientific equipment, and could lead to further specialisation at national level. KIK-IRPA already participates to some extent in these networks, but there are opportunities to increase participation.

Services and outreach

There are two types of scientific service provided by KIK-IRPA: scientific research into masterpieces and other cultural objects including art historical and technical/scientific analysis; and science based conservation-restoration services in the studios and workshops. The quality of these services is clear, from publications in journals, own publications and the institute's reputation. However, the criteria for selection of objects for scientific analysis or treatment are not clear.

A third, less conspicuous, but important type of service KIK-IRPA is delivering, is the intern training. In this training with a duration up to 1 year, national and international interns get involved in research activities in all departments. This programme is initiated by KIK-IRPA, and mainly financed by the Baillet Latour Fund.

Obviously, the conservation-restoration studios are able to treat a wide range of cultural objects, but since its inception the public and private conservation-restoration field around KIK-IRPA changed dramatically. During this process, KIK-IRPA's unique position vanished.

The relatively young preventive conservation unit plays an interesting role in KIK-IRPA since, other than all other cells, it has no research function. Its work is mainly service provision. In terms of collections care this service is particularly cost-effective since its impact affects whole collections rather than individual objects. It is also the part of KIK-IRPA which has very good relations with other (non-federal) levels of government in Belgium in supplying them with well-appreciated advice.

The quoted rate of KIK-IRPA for scientific services is similar to charges made by accredited conservator-restorers in the UK but is lower than in the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany. According to KIK-IRPA they are considered expensive (also in comparison to private service providers) though the price charged by KIK-IRPA returns far more than plain service provision, due to the interdisciplinary treatment and inspection of works.

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Outreach and communication

Cultural heritage institutions without collections like KIK-IRPA contribute to a nation's identity and provide narratives for the cultural memory, which has a large social value and a possible indirect economic impact. This is clearly visible for KIK-IRPA with the Ghent altar piece (a World Heritage Site) case as a prominent example.

In practice, the strategy for communication and outreach focuses on providing information about works of the institute, in French, Dutch and, more and more, English, mostly to the direct stakeholders. An important part of the work of the communication department are the Bulletin and the Scientia Artis publications, and the website of the institute which is maintained in three languages. For communication towards the general public, the department relies on the institute's website and public events such as the open days of the institute.

Overall, KIK-IRPA has a comparatively poor positioning in media but has recently experienced an improvement of its visibility and is particularly recognised in Belgium and France. The coverage in English-speaking countries was modest. The wealth of interesting projects running at the Institute at any given time is not reflected in the outreach. A more active role of KIK-IRPA in the media area could strongly improve the social impact of KIK-IRPA's work.

Main conclusions

Since KIK-IRPA was founded, the Institute's activities have evolved and practically widened in terms of types of techniques, materials and cultural heritage objects. The interdisciplinary study is at the core of the KIK-IRPA approach that also includes an active engagement in a variety of EU-projects. By intertwining research and services, there is a strong focus on practical application without losing depth. With this approach KIK-IRPA has achieved a worldwide reputation.

Over the years, KIK-IRPA has developed clearly visible areas of strengths within the areas of documentation, conservation and technical laboratories. Outstanding examples are the Centre for the Study of the Flemish Primitives, C14-dating and dendrochronology, scientific imagery, BALat (Belgian Art Links and Tools), and the art technological investigation and treatment (conservation/restoration) of master pieces such as paintings and polychrome sculptures. Across the whole field of science relevant for KIK-IRPA, the Institute demonstrated high to outstanding scientific qualities.

This broad role of KIK-IRPA is however not sustainable anymore. Budget cuts and consequent reduction of the number of statutory staff have led to a loss of certain capabilities and more capabilities are under threat. The strength of KIK-IRPA has diminished over the past years.

As a Federal Scientific Institution in Belgium, KIK-IRPA suffers from severe bureaucratic and financial constraints. These are extremely discouraging for the self-esteem of the Institute and for people involved and hamper the flexibility of the organisation in fulfilling scientific activities requested by or in collaboration with external partners.

Moreover, although the effects of these external constraints cannot be underestimated, KIK-IRPA is paralyzed by additional internal constraints. An inward-looking approach of the employees can be observed, possibly driven by a strong internal solidarity against the many external uncertainties. This seems to make KIK-IRPA focus on keeping things the way they are, instead of pro-actively developing a creative vision towards the future to survive as a leading institute.

Recommendations for KIK-IRPA

- KIK-IRPA still has the potential to live up to its worldwide reputation. A prerequisite for an institution as KIK-IRPA to be (again) among the world players in the field of Cultural Heritage is a strategy towards that goal.

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- The Institutes new strategy must address to what extent the plans for future research and collection/service delivery strategies contribute to the quality, visibility, transparency and relevance of KIK-IRPA in the near future. If the Institute were to be re-branded it should showcase an Institute with a shortlist of core expertise and services unique in Belgium and worldwide when it comes to examining, understanding, treating and dissemination about cultural heritage from the Belgian Federation.
- Although there is no formal director-general (and therefore no formal approved strategy), KIK-IRPA management and staff should be self-confident and opportunistic and take their fate in their own hands and develop such an encompassing, forward looking strategy for the Institute as a whole.
- The change of leadership with the retirement of the present acting Director-General Christina Ceulemans is a good moment to create an agreed vision, supported by a strategy and an implementation plan.
- The new, more focused strategy should take its departure in the areas where the strengths of the Institute lies, and relate to (inter)national demand. This means that KIK-IRPA should make clear, strategic choices and melt down the many, historically grown areas of research to a feasible, manageable number of areas of excellence that are above critical mass.
- Some of the present areas will form the core KIK-IRPA, but not all the areas have to stay within the Institute. The decision about “leave or stay” should be taken in the light of the low number of administration staff, a changed society context, the changes in the cultural heritage field in general and before the background of possible future strategic partners (FSIs, Belgian universities, European network and freelance partners). The peer review report presents some first suggestions for focusing.
- Attention must be paid to the low number of administrative support staff at KIK-IRPA. Management functions (like finance and HRM) are not represented at management team level. Especially, the financial and commercial function needs strengthening in the increasingly more commercial surroundings. An (international) Advisory Board should be installed to support KIK-IRPA’s management.
- KIK-IRPA’s overall strategy should include a balanced research strategy. This new strategy should include only the essential core aspects of the Institute’s expertise, with a clear definition of what is within research scope, and what not.
- The strategy should inspire staff to exercise a more entrepreneurial spirit in pursuing options for external *research* financing.
- The external research relations should be revisited in the context of the new research strategy and should be made more permanent by securing strong personal and organisational relations with relevant groups. This should include education.
- KIK-IRPA should strive to become a permanent member within a European network of comparable institutions. This would allow the Institute to better shape areas of high specialisation while leaving other areas to European partners. This trans-national approach might help to overcome the limitations of operating in a small country with limited budgets.
- The approach towards scientific strategies should also include a clear and transparent commercial services strategy, governed by an overall integrative Cultural Heritage research policy. Services provided should be built on research strengths, but research topics should also be (to some extent) guided by service opportunities and needs.
- Analyse (full) costs and returns for all services delivered, and develop a suitable pricing strategy.
- Take into account a possible competition between KIK-IRPA and the private sector and/or whether there are state aid issues. KIK-IRPA should not compete with the private sector of

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conservator-restorers, but should investigate how they could be a service-institute for them, offering them not only analysis but also advanced training into how the highly-sophisticated equipment at the Institute can advance their practice. In return for these services, KIK-IRPA can request fees so as to compensate for a possible reduction in works treated.

- Analyse the cost-effectiveness of the services of the conservation-restoration studios. This investigation should also include an analysis of the number of suitably trained and experienced conservator-restorers present in Belgium relative to the number of different types of objects needing care in the country, and, in relation to that, an assessment of the contribution of KIK-IRPA.
- The impressive professional experience of the staff should be used to actively support Belgian training in cultural heritage. Training can be provided during university education or on job in creative arrangements such as guest-lectureship or professor in residence. Rather than the current practice of 1:1 interns and apprenticeships that are valued and effective, a much broader impact can be reached by an active involvement of KIK-IRPA in university training.
- Communication and dissemination are important tools for KIK-IRPA to realise its renewed strategy. More than at present, communication should be focussed on making the Institute better known to the outside world to attract new clients and sponsors. Also, a new communication and dissemination strategy should far more than today include the general public via open days and (social) media work in order to increase the impact of the cultural heritage mission of KIK-IRPA. Strong interactions with journalists from newspapers and magazines are recommended to raise public profile.
- Media impact should be analysed regularly to get the information to decide whether the strategy works or should be adapted.
- The efforts for translation works should be reduced and outsourcing translations should be considered as the general rule.
- Much attention is also paid to making physical publications (books, etc.). The volume of copies sold is low (below 1000). Since sales of books will never recover the investment spent on them *and* recognising the great value and significance of their content, it is suggested to find other ways to distribute the books' content. A suggestion is a print-on-demand scheme with free online publishing.

Recommendations for the Federal Government

- The quality of the building of KIK-IRPA is unfit for its purpose (e.g. fire protection, climate control, security, adequate storage size), threatening the high-quality works of art that are treated there. This should be addressed as soon as possible, a responsibility for the Federal Government. Suggestions would be a thorough renovation and expansion or a new building altogether.
- The bureaucratic procedures reported are not fit for modern research institutions with a service function and should be changed as soon as possible into a more stimulating and rewarding system with more autonomy for the FSIs (SELOR, financial rules).
- A director-general for KIK-IRPA with full competence and full responsibility (so not an ad interim appointment) is urgently needed and has to be appointed without any further delay.
- The new Director-General should be appointed only after an international selection procedure (to either find quality that is not available in Belgium, or to give more credibility to the Belgian that is appointed because (s)he came out best in this international procedure) and should have the mandate to facilitate and create new opportunities.