

**RESEARCH REVIEW**

**AMSTERDAM INSTITUTE FOR  
HUMANITIES RESEARCH**

NICA

NETHERLANDS INSTITUTE FOR CULTURAL ANALYSIS

**UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM**

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This report was finalized on 21 February 2019.





# **REPORT ON THE RESEARCH REVIEW OF THE NETHERLANDS INSTITUTE FOR CULTURAL ANALYSIS (NICA) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM**

## **1. FOREWORD BY COMMITTEE CHAIR**

While we all felt honoured to be invited for this research review, we were also a little daunted by the prospect of an intensive three-day inspection of four distinct but related research organisations covering a broad spectrum of humanities disciplines. As it turned out, we were in for an exciting and encouraging ride: exciting, because we learned much about cutting-edge work in contemporary cultural scholarship; encouraging, because instead of having to weather the doom-and-gloom jeremiads so common in humanities meta-talk today, we were invited to join in conversation with enthusiastic and clear-sighted scholars, support staff and policy makers determined to keep up the good fight in trying times.

On behalf of the committee, I should particularly like to register our appreciation of the excellent conditions we were offered to carry out the task entrusted to us. Elske Gerritsen and Thomas Vaessens (representing AIHR) hosted us admirably both during business and after hours; the various representatives of NICA we had the pleasure of meeting were invariably frank and forthcoming; and QANU secretary Fiona Schouten deserves a Medal for Advanced Cat-Herding—and indeed for meticulous note-taking and report-drafting.

Finally, my warm thanks to my colleagues in the committee for their cordial and constructive cooperation throughout the process and for their kind blind eye to the chairman's unrepresentative gender. I hope that, like me, they can sign off on this report happier and wiser humanities humans than when we first met.

Prof. dr. Ortwin de Graef



## 2. THE REVIEW COMMITTEE AND THE PROCEDURES

### **2.1. Scope of the review**

The review committee was asked to perform a review of the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Analysis (NICA) at the University of Amsterdam. The review was part of the assessment of the Amsterdam Institute for Humanities Research (AIHR). This assessment included the research units ASCA, ASH, AHM, and ARTES, as well as the national research schools NICA, RMeS, OSL and Huizinga. The assessment was performed by two committees in two separate site visits. NICA was assessed as part of Cluster I, which also included OSL, RMeS and ASCA.

The committee followed the Terms of Reference provided by NICA, which were based on the Terms of Reference for the assessment of National Research Schools in the Humanities as decided by the Deans of the Dutch Humanities Faculties (DLG). Following these Terms of Reference, the committee was asked to assess the quality of the education of PhD students provided by NICA and the added value of NICA as a national forum for the field of cultural analysis/cultural studies in the period 2012 up to and including 2017, in relation to its own mission statement and formulated goals.

### **2.2. Composition of the committee**

The composition of the committee was as follows:

- Prof. dr. Ortwin de Graef (KULeuven)
- Prof. dr. Ruth Sonderegger (Akademie der Bildende Künste, Vienna)
- Prof. dr. Jenny Slatman (Tilburg University)
- Dr. Anne Marit Waade (Aarhus University)
- Prof. dr. Hilde van den Bulck (Drexel University, Philadelphia)
- Drs. Anke Bangma (TENT Rotterdam)
- Prof. dr. Maaike Meijer (Maastricht University)

The committee was supported by dr. Fiona Schouten, who acted as secretary on behalf of QANU.

### **2.3. Independence**

All members of the committee signed a statement of independence to guarantee an unbiased and independent assessment of the quality of NICA.

### **2.4. Data provided to the committee**

The committee received the self-evaluation report from the unit under review. The committee also received the following documents:

- the Terms of Reference;
- the Quality and Relevance in the Humanities (QRiH) manual.

### **2.5. Procedures followed by the committee**

Prior to the site visit, the committee members independently formulated a preliminary assessment of the units under review based on the written information that was provided by AIHR. This documentation also included quantitative data (see Appendix 2).

The final review is based on both the documentation provided by NICA and the information gathered during the interviews with management and representatives of the research unit during the site visit. The site visit took place on 21-23 November 2018 in Amsterdam (see the schedule in Appendix 1). At the start of the site visit, the committee was briefed by QANU about research reviews. It also discussed the preliminary assessments and decided upon a number of comments and questions. The committee agreed upon procedural matters and aspects of the review. After the interviews, the committee discussed its findings and comments in order to allow the chair to present the preliminary findings and to provide the secretary with argumentation to draft a first version of the review report.

The draft report by committee and secretary was presented to NICA for factual corrections and comments. In close consultation with the chair and other committee members, the comments were reviewed to draft the final report. The final report was presented to the Board of the University of Amsterdam and to the management of NICA.



## 3. ASSESSMENT OF THE NETHERLANDS INSTITUTE FOR CULTURAL ANALYSIS (NICA)

### **3.1. Introduction**

The Netherlands Institute for Cultural Analysis (NICA) is dedicated to cultural studies/cultural analysis. As the Dutch national research school dedicated to the academic study of contemporary culture from an interdisciplinary, theoretical, and critical perspective, NICA offers graduate courses for research master and PhD students, and serves as a professional network for affiliated scholars. Eight universities participate in RMeS: the University of Amsterdam, Utrecht University, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Leiden University, the University of Groningen, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Radboud University and Maastricht University.

In 2015, the Deans of the Dutch Humanities Faculties (DLG) decided that the hosting of national research schools in the humanities should rotate between participating universities. In due course, NICA, which has been hosted by the University of Amsterdam for two consecutive periods, is considering a relocation to Utrecht University in 2021. NICA is funded by a contribution from the DLG, additional funding by the University of Amsterdam, and contributions of PhD and research master students registered with the School.

NICA's goals are:

- Facilitating a national graduate environment, in which staff researchers, PhD candidates, and research-master students meet and interact. As a national school, NICA strives to introduce its members to an extended intellectual community, open up research perspectives beyond local priorities, and advance the sharing of resources and expertise. Following this aim, it observes no rigid boundaries between activities for PhD fellows and research-master students (though different emphases certainly apply);
- Organising activities that map and analyse the present — including the deployment of the past within the present (cultural memory, cultural heritage). NICA likes its activities to reflect current research priorities, and to propose new tools and concepts to gain critical purchase on contemporary circumstances that are changed and changing;
- Fostering international dialogue;
- Opening out to social and political partners outside the academy. NICA wants to enable intensified contact between academics and various parties working outside the university: professionals, intellectuals, curators, organisers, activists, artists, journalists, writers;
- Cultivating a light and non-hierarchical organisation, hospitable to varied initiatives. NICA prefers informal dialogue over protocols and procedures. Both PhD fellows and research-master students are very welcome to initiate activities of their own. In principle, NICA's activities are open to all.

During the assessment, it became clear to the committee that it has not always been possible for NICA to convince the humanities faculties involved to contribute (as per the agreement reached by the Deans of the Faculties of Humanities in the Netherlands in 2011) an adequate amount of teaching hours for specific courses in specific periods. The committee calls on the faculties to ensure that the necessary provisions are made to give the national research schools the full amount of teaching hours to which they are entitled, irrespective of time and topic of the courses the school programmes require. The highest level of humanities education in the Netherlands must receive all the support it needs to maintain its quality.

### **3.2. The quality of the education of PhD students**

NICA is dedicated to cultural studies/cultural analysis, a field which is not defined by a particular type, medium, or genre of objects, but investigates contemporary socio-cultural objects, phenomena, and developments from a broadly hermeneutic, critical, theoretical, and interdisciplinary perspective. The field cuts across different disciplines, such as comparative literature, media studies, art history,

theatre and performance studies, sociology, communication studies, and others. NICA is currently hosted by the University of Amsterdam. The national research school shares a great deal of common ground with ASCA, the UvA research school which was also assessed by this committee. NICA and ASCA share a field of study and show overlap in personnel. Moreover, while ASCA is not a national organ, it has a very inclusive policy, opening up its courses and events to researchers and PhD students from other universities. The importance of NICA in PhD training is therefore not immediately obvious.

The committee found, however, that NICA's course curriculum and setup are of clearly added value to the PhD students from the field of cultural studies and cultural analysis. ASCA is locally embedded and known for its long history in the establishment of the field as well as its particular identity in research approach. ASCA is still very much associated with cultural analysis, even though it has broadened its scope to explicitly include cultural studies. NICA is a national school and occupies a neutral position in the field. During the site visit, the panel learned from PhD students and scholars from other universities across the country that they appreciate and feel at home at NICA. The non-ASCA researchers involved in NICA provide additional methodological plurality and outlooks.

NICA offers PhD candidates a number of recurrent courses and activities. These include seminars, which consist of teams of staff members, PhD students and selected research master students meeting regularly throughout the year to debate key readings, present and discuss work in progress and host guest speakers. NICA offers seminars on critical theory, urban studies, comparative media, film and philosophy, and phenomenology, amongst others. Another regular activity is the PhD Work in Progress, where PhD candidates present a sample of their work for peer discussion and feedback. Furthermore, NICA hosts a yearly three-day International Graduate Workshop initiated and run by PhD students in cooperation with ASCA. NICA also offers three eight-week courses open to PhD and research master students on various topics, which include methodological and theoretical approaches and debates. Finally, NICA hosts three platforms where affiliated staff members, PhD students and selected research master students organise activities such as masterclasses and workshops. Aside from the regular course offerings, NICA also offers a wide range of workshops, masterclasses by guest professors, reading groups and tutorials, as well as multi-day summer and winter schools.

The committee is impressed with the width and amount of NICA activities on offer. In terms of content, NICA is complete, very topical and capable of instantly absorbing the needs, interests and new directions of the field. NICA's organisation is primarily bottom-up: all members, including PhD students, are invited to initiate activities. This adaptability and openness is highly appreciated by NICA's members. The committee agrees that this uniquely open and inviting design functions as a fertile ground for collaborations, new ideas and useful feedback. It is very easy for PhD candidates to share their work with peers and senior researchers, and there are ample opportunities for them to organise activities. NICA's proximity to ASCA allows the school to make use of that group's excellent communication systems and its network.

The downside of a national research school with such a flexible structure can be its relative lack of coherence. PhD candidates are invited to join many groups, but never obliged; nor are they held to a particular minimum of courses or topics. There are no guarantees that certain topics will be repeated every few years to allow all PhD candidates to get acquainted with them. Course evaluation is not performed in a formal way: feedback is presented orally or requested through email by the managing director. Nonetheless, the committee learned that, on the whole, this flexible system seems to work well for all those involved. The impressive amount of activities organised testifies to a vibrant, lively and open research community.

NICA explicitly chooses to open all of its activities to PhD and research master students alike. In practice, the research master students participate primarily in the eight-week courses NICA offers as well as in activities that match their own research interest. Though it may seem as if research master students (91 in 2017) greatly outnumber PhD students, this is not the case due to the large number of external PhD candidates affiliated with NICA (49 in 2017 alongside 34 funded PhD students). The



combination of research master and PhD students is also addressed in course evaluations and monitored by NICA's programme team. This open policy thus does not constitute a threat for the level of the PhD students' education.

### **3.3. The added value of NICA as a national forum for the field**

NICA aims to function as a national forum for the field of cultural studies/cultural analysis and has been active to achieve this aim. The advisory board of NICA has served as the 'distinguished panel' for the specification of the Quality Research Indicators in the Humanities (QRH). NICA also organises three inter-university collaborative research platforms: the Platform for Postcolonial Readings, the Benelux Association for the Study of Art, Culture, and the Environment, and the Design and Fashion Cultures Platform. NICA organises yearly conferences as well as such valorisation activities as public lectures, museum collaborations and conferences that open out to extra-academic social and political partners.

The committee is pleased with the activities of NICA. In general, the active community created here acts as a hub stimulating research collaboration and exchange across the field. Additionally, NICA gained an NWO graduate grant in 2014, funding four PhD positions. NICA's contribution to the field of cultural studies and cultural analysis is therefore evident.

The committee learned from the documentation and interviews that NICA is perceived as somewhat Amsterdam- or Randstad-centred. Most activities are organised in Amsterdam and are therefore partly paid for by the University of Amsterdam. The committee recommends NICA to rethink this approach and reach out more, especially to the non-Randstad partner universities. According to the committee, moving NICA to another university entirely is not the only way to achieve this. Organising a larger part of the activities across the universities in the network would enable NICA to strengthen its national networking function and share the costs of its programme more evenly.

The valorisation and outreach activities of NICA are a positive aspect. The committee noticed that these activities are often focused on a select and relatively high-brow audience, e.g. museum curators, artists etc., while also connecting with emerging societal groups engaged in developing critical vocabularies and knowledge outside of academia. The committee recommends looking into opportunities to reach a wider public and invite other audiences in.

### **3.4. Conclusions**

According to the committee, NICA provides PhD students in cultural studies/cultural analysis with an educational programme of very high quality. In spite of its similarities to ASCA, NICA is of clear added value due to its national function and its openness to methodological and theoretical plurality. NICA offers a very loosely structured curriculum with a wide variety of courses. All NICA members are invited to contribute to this programme, which has a uniquely bottom-up structure. The committee noticed that this setup generally works for NICA and results in a lively and inspiring research community. NICA could strengthen its influence as a national forum by reaching out to a general audience and by organising more activities and courses outside Amsterdam and the Randstad.

## **4. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Create a more systematic course evaluation procedure.
- Look into opportunities to reach a wider public and invite other audiences in.
- Organise more activities away from Amsterdam/the Randstad.

# APPENDICES





## APPENDIX 1: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT

Day 1: 21 November 2018

<b>Time</b>	<b>Who/What</b>	<b>Where</b>
<i>12:00-13:00</i>	<i>Lunch</i>	E1.01D
13:00-15:00	Private meeting for committee members only with secretary Qanu	E1.01E
15:00-15:30	Prof. Fred Weerman (dean), prof. Thomas Vaessens (director AIHR and vice-dean), dr. Elske Gerritsen (head of research)	E1.01E
<i>15:30-15:45</i>	<i>Tea break</i>	E1.01D
15:45-16:15	Meeting on the educational programme for PhD's: dr. Carlos Reijnen (director Graduate School of the Humanities), Thomas Vaessens, and dr. Eloe Kingma (coordinator of the educational programme)	E1.01E
16:15-17:00	Prof. dr. Patricia Pisters (director of ASCA), Prof. dr. Esther Peeren (co-director of ASCA) and Eloe Kingma (coordinator of ASCA)	E1.01E
<i>17:00-18:00</i>	<i>Drinks committee, secretary Qanu, Fred Weerman, Thomas Vaessens, Carlos Reijnen, Patricia Pisters, Esther Peeren, Elske Gerritsen, Eloe Kingma</i>	F1.01
<i>18:30-21:00</i>	<i>Dinner committee, secretary Qanu</i>	<i>Hemelse modder</i>

Day 2: 22 November 2018

<b>Time</b>	<b>Who/What</b>	<b>Where</b>
9:00-9:30	Private meeting for committee members only with secretary Qanu	E1.01D
9:30-10:00	Meeting with PhD students of ASCA: Noortje de Leij, Divya Nadkarni, Laura Vermeeren, Nadia de Vries, Daniel de Zeeuw	E1.01E
<i>10:00-10:15</i>	<i>Coffee break</i>	E1.01D
10:15-11:00	Meeting with Assistant Professors and Associate Professors of ASCA: Gaston Franssen, Jaap Kooijman, Stefania Milan, Ben Moore, Hanneke Stuit, Esther Weltevrede	E1.01E
11:00-12:00	Meeting with Professors of ASCA: Caroll Clarkson, Giovanna Fossati, Jeroen de Kloet, Julia Kursell, Ellen Rutten	E1.01E
<i>12:00-13:00</i>	<i>Lunch with members of ASCA</i>	E1.01D
13:00-14:15	Private meeting for committee members only with secretary Qanu	E1.01E



14:15-14:45	Tea break with Patricia Pisters, Thomas Vaessens, opportunity for further questions	E1.01D
14:45-16:00	Private meeting for committee member only with secretary Qanu	E1.01E
16:00-16:30	Travel time	
16:30-18:00	Visit Eye Filmmuseum, Eye collection center	Eye collection center, Asterweg 26, Amsterdam
18:30-21:00	Dinner committee members, secretary Qanu	EYE Bar Restaurant

### Day 3: 23 November 2018

9:00-10:30	Private meeting (committee members only)	E1.01E
10:30-11:15	Meeting with representatives of the Board of NICA, including PhD's Maaïke Bleeker (UU), Frans-Willem Korsten (UL en EUR), Pepita Hesselberth (UL), Sandra Becker (RUG), Tingting Hui (UL), Sofia Apostolidou (UvA), Murat Aydemir (UvA), Eloë Kingma (coordinator NICA)	E1.01E
11:15-12:00	Meeting with representatives of RMeS, including PhD's Frank Kessler (UU), Marcel Broersma (RUG), Richard Rogers (UvA), Maryn Wilkinson (UvA) Stephanie de Smale (PhD), Tim Groot Kormelink (PhD), Chantal Olijerhoek (coordinator RMeS)	E1.01E
12:00-12:15	Coffee Break	E1.01D
12:15-13:00	Meeting with representatives of the Board of OSL, including PhD's Brigitte Adriaensen (RUN en OU), Geert Buelens (UU), Jesse van Amelsvoort (PhD), Marileen La Haije (PhD), Alex Rutten (PhD), Stephan Besser (UvA), Paul Koopman (coordinator)	E1.01E
13:00-14:00	Lunch	E1.01D
14:00-14:30	Meeting with directors of National Research Schools for further questions Henk van der Liet (UvA), Richard Rogers (UvA), Murat Aydemir (UvA)	E1.01E
14:30-16:30	Private meeting (committee members only)	E1.01E
16:30-17:30	Presentation of preliminary conclusions by the Committee	V.O.C. Room
17:30-	Drinks	V.O.C. Room

## APPENDIX 2: QUANTITATIVE DATA

Financial overview 2012-2017				
Year	Budget	Personnel	Courses	Result
2012	53.000,00	42.326,00	11.394,00	-720,00
2013	76.382,00	52.382,00	28.405,00	-4.405,00
2014	77.250,00	50.475,00	38.839,85	-12.064,85
2015	73.250,00	47.197,00	15.855,05	10.197,95
2016	91.853,00	65.821,00	17.899,00	8.133,00
2017	99.846,00	75.246,00	25.520,09	-920,09

### Influx:

2017	3
2016	3
2015	15
2014	6
2013	10
2012	17
2011	14

### Defences:

2017	4
2016	6
2015	9
2014	3

