

# REPORT

## EVALUATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MANAGEMENT CONTRACT

INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT POLICY AND MANAGEMENT (IOB)  
ANTWERPEN

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## INTRODUCTION

The Flemish Community has concluded a management agreement with the Institute for Development Policy and Management (IOB) for the period from 1 January 2016 to 31 December 2020. Part of this agreement is that its implementation will be evaluated at the end of the cycle by a commission appointed by the Minister. This committee was established in June 2019 and consists of three members:

- Dirk Buyens, Vlerick Business School (Chairman)
- Isa Baud, University of Amsterdam
- Jean Bossuyt, European Centre for Development Policy Management (Secretary)

The task of this committee was to check whether IOB fulfils the conditions and obligations laid down in the management contract and what it has yielded for the Institute. In particular, it was asked to report on the implementation of the various elements of the management contract.

On 13 September 2019 the Committee received the IOB's self-assessment report. The visit was carried out on 2 October 2019 and gave the Committee the opportunity to hold structured discussions with representatives of all parts of IOB: the Office, those responsible for education, research and outreach, representatives of the Assisting Academic Staff (AAP) and Special Academic Staff (BAP), Independent Academic Staff (ZAP), the Administrative Staff (ATP), and students (Masters, alumni, PhD students).

The preliminary findings of the committee were presented to staff and students of IOB at the end of the day. The final findings and recommendations have been incorporated in this report.

The committee would like to thank the chairman and the management of IOB for the hospitable reception and efficient organization of the visitation, and all those involved for their constructive and open attitude in these discussions.

## 1. Mission

The management agreement defines the core mission of IOB as the provision of post-initial education, the performance of scientific research and the provision of services concerning the economic, political and social aspects of development policy and management, including the preparation of doctoral theses with a view to obtaining a doctoral degree at a Flemish or foreign university. IOB must ensure a demonstrable interaction between these three core tasks.

In the previous visit and accompanying evaluation of IOB (April-June 2015), it was established that IOB globally carries out its triple mission in a successful manner to the satisfaction of students, customers, staff and the UAntwerp. Building on an entrenched culture of learning, quality assurance and participation, IOB implemented important - and broadly supported - strategic and institutional innovations that strengthened its positioning, coherence and strength. Examples of these were the implementation of an identity transition (by filling various ZAP vacancies), the merger of existing theme groups into a single research group (with various lines), a further refinement/ simplification of the consultation and decision-making bodies, the establishment of a Scientific Advisory Council and better integration into the UAntwerp.

The committee's report from 2015 also concluded that the IOB House now has sufficiently strong foundations to put less energy into improving its internal processes in the coming years. In the next phase of the institutional life cycle, more attention should be paid to further clarifying various external challenges - in a rapidly changing environment for international cooperation and evolving visions of the societal role of knowledge institutes. Examples of such challenges are the branding, societal anchoring and public role of the institute; the communication strategies; and the policy on internationalisation.

During its visit at the beginning of October, the committee was able to establish that in recent years IOB has **continued to invest in critical self-questioning, institution building and addressing the recommendations of previous evaluations**. This took place against the background of a **"significant growth"** of the institute in the quantity and (international) quality of outputs (PhD's, external funding, publications). This growth is generally seen as a positive evolution by staff at all levels<sup>1</sup>.

The self-evaluation report analyses how integrated the different dimensions of the IOB operation are. This is done for the most important aspects such as the general mandate; education, research, and service provision; cooperation within and outside Flanders; and various internal processes (such as the policy plan and quality assurance, personnel policy, management). Indicative scores per item are used that give a picture of how the organisation sees itself in the year 2019. For IOB, various domains (education, research) and internal processes (quality control and accreditation) are considered 'optimised' (i.e. the highest score). The policy and management aspects of the IOB operation are generally assessed as indicating a 'controlled system'. In line with the findings of the previous review (2015), IOB acknowledges that there is **still a way to go for service delivery** (with a score of a 'structured approach') and cooperation in the **Global North** (which is now organised on an 'ad hoc' basis).

With regard to the interaction between the three core tasks, the Committee was able to establish that the triad (or '**nexus**') of education policy-oriented research-societal outreach (the current name for service provision) has been **strengthened** in various ways in recent years. This was done, for example, by making the IOB's **mission statement** explicit in the sense that all activities are expected to contribute to a "just and sustainable world". Furthermore, the experimental programme '**IOB Going Global**' is being used to give research partners from the South an increasing role as educational partners (via South participation in the

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<sup>1</sup> See SWOT-analysis in self-assessment report.

Masters in Antwerp or joint IOB-education in the South), as well as by deepening the functioning with **alumni**, who are, among other things, actively involved in short specific IOB educational initiatives. This offers opportunities to increase the social outreach of IOB work while also contributing to “a future with a less North-centred, ‘decolonialised’ global IOB”. The social outreach is also strengthened by the greater educational embedding of IOB in the **UAntwerp** - which is itself surfing the wave of internationalisation. Compared to the past, IOB expertise is increasingly being applied for all kinds of roles at the UAntwerp (public debates, education and mobilization) that allow the knowledge produced to radiate more widely and increase visibility/awareness.

## 2. Educational policy

The committee judges that IOB offers real Flemish, Belgian and international **added value** in its education, which is generally highly appreciated by students and alumni. This is partly due to reforms from the past (such as the major curriculum revision that led to the current three Masters and accompanying modules) as well as to the ongoing search for qualitative refinement of the offer and the educational practice. This continuous investment in the education part is necessary because it remains a challenge for an Advanced Master to match the educational offer to the divergent expectations of the students. As a development institute, IOB must also respond to the rapid evolutions in thinking and acting on development, the increasing assertiveness of countries from the Global South and the expanding development agenda.

The **modular** approach of the 3 Masters - in which courses consist of different units and subunits - offers several advantages. Students can broaden their choices by following certain issues that are of particular interest to them outside their specific Master. Thanks to these modules, IOB can make room in a flexible way for new themes on the international agenda or experiment with other methods (such as the ‘action labs’ in which students can apply specific evaluation methods in concrete cases). Furthermore, the thematic modules and the Master’s Dissertation are strongly linked to the research work in the nexus logic pursued by IOB. A programme director is specifically charged with ensuring coherence between the 3 Masters.

The renewal of the educational approach was further stimulated by the increasing **internationalisation**, in particular through the previously mentioned ‘IOB Going Global’ (aimed at strengthened cooperation with Southern partners) and the deepening of alumni activities. The latter part was previously organised in an ad hoc manner. The committee was able to establish that the entire alumni work was thoroughly revised, broadened and institutionalised, partly with a view to optimal follow-up and utilisation of this human potential in the chain of educational research and social outreach. Examples of this are:

- (i) the increasing weight of IOB alumni in the internationalisation of education (in 2018, alumni accounted for 44% of IOB publications with a southern author);
- (ii) the alumni seminars organised by IOB in the South (which offer opportunities for increased visibility and synergies with other development actors.
- (iii) the Alumni Barometer Impact Research Project (2018-2021) with alumni teams from 6 countries, trying to map the impact of IOB education programmes towards alumni at various levels (i.e. individual, organisation and society).

The committee **supports the efforts** to involve research partners in the South more in education within the framework of ‘IOB Going Global’, which can, among other things, contribute to a stronger international profile of IOB and reduce the risk of a ‘cultural bias’ (of a predominantly ‘white’ staff in education). She does, however, ask the question **how far IOB wants to / can go in this respect**. The exchange of professors

is a 'manageable' job, but another story is the institutional support of Southern educational partners or the organisation of 'joint masters' in due course. IOB may be too small for that. The answers made it clear that IOB is aware of the limits in this type of process. The path chosen rather consists of "limited, incremental construction, where there is potential". This is the case with IOB's attempt to promote 'student mobility' (through 6 weeks of research work in the field) or 'staff mobility' (through exchanges, the participation of partners in benchmarking theses or the provision of certain parts of IOB education). It should also be reiterated here that the internationalisation of UAntwerpen offers many opportunities to make the issue of development better known to the university public. Various IOB staff members teach in various faculties, in interuniversity masters, in short-term programmes or in the compulsory UAntwerp basket of broadening subjects (in this case 'Global Justice').

In terms of services provided, IOB **exceeds** the **expectations** of the management agreement. Over the past period of five years (2014-2018), it delivered an average of 61 final diplomas in the 3 Masters on an annual basis. On 1 January 2019, IOB had 33 PhD students, 23 of whom with an international profile (including 15 from the 'Global South'). In the same period, an average of 5.2 new students started their PhD work on an annual basis and an average of 4.8 PhDs were successfully completed. The annual drop-out of PhD students is limited to 2 per year.

The management and quality control systems for education were already at a **high level** and there are indications that IOB is continuing along this line through a system of **permanent internal monitoring** and questioning of what is happening on the work floor. In addition to the existing system of surveys and evaluations by students and colleagues, the risk of less relevant educational content is avoided by 'team-teaching' (or the joint definition of subjects).

Another challenge / threat in the medium term is the high dependence on **the VLIR ICP grants**, which are still in force for 5 years and concern a specific target group. This could mortgage IOB's core mission to work for the poor(est) countries. At the same time, it is feared that there may be a future lack of synergy between Flemish (core funding) and federal (scholarships) efforts.

### 3. Research policy

This part of the IOB operation was thoroughly reformed in 2013. The existing structure of four tight thematic groups (operating largely in silos) was replaced by looser, functional 'lines of research', which should increase the synergies between actors and IOB's various core tasks. The 2015 review found that this change was positively appreciated at all levels of the organisation and also led to increased effectiveness and efficiency - despite a number of drawbacks (i.e. more fragmentation, an unclear collective vision and communication, i.e. the difficulty for young PhD students and post-docs to find a 'place' in the bigger picture). However, the benefits were estimated to outweigh the potential drawbacks and IOB was encouraged to continue along this path.

This was also done with the updated **Research Policy Plan 2017-2022**<sup>2</sup>, which builds on (external) evaluations and benchmark studies, contains precise indicators for the expected scientific output and a strong commitment to internationalisation and the nexus with education and social outreach. In order to increase overall coherence, the function of 'line of inquiry coordinator' was abolished and the task

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<sup>2</sup> Research Strategy 2017-2022. '*Development Processes, Actors and Policies*' met drie onderzoekslijnen (eerder dan vier in de vorige periode) respectievelijk gelinkt aan relevante issues die de ontwikkelingsagenda domineren: (i) Environment and Sustainable Development; (ii) Global Governance and Inclusive Development; (iii) State Formation and Resilient Societies.

entrusted to the chairman of the committee of inquiry. The **ZAP-vacancies** were further filled in the past period and an additional place was created - so that the number of FTE ZAP-vacancies evolved from 10 (January 2016) to 13 (October 2019). **New AAP members** were better embedded by linking them to the ZAP research agenda from recruitment onwards, while there was also more room for specialization in domains other than IOB's traditional themes. In June 2018, a '**communication and outreach officer**' was recruited to help researchers with impact measurement and outreach. Over the past period, IOB has experienced significant **growth in external funding** for all kinds of assignments - testimony to the growing reputation and recognition of staff expertise. Despite the resulting workload, the **high level of job satisfaction** is striking at ZAP, AAP and BAP. The most important factors that are systematically cited are the mission, the multidisciplinary, the nexus between educational research and outreach, the horizontal and decentralised corporate culture, the opportunities for independent work, the bond with (empowered) students and the "*stimulating and enabling environment*" in the institute.<sup>3</sup>

The committee recognizes the **advantages** of this relatively loose, rather informal and '*bottom-up*' research approach, with a relatively open process of agenda setting. This is in line with the DNA of the institute and the expectations of its staff. However, it would like to make a number of comments that constitute just as many **strategic points of attention for the future**. How do you set priorities in such a system, especially if more external funding comes in at the same time? How do you reconcile quantity and quality criteria? How do you build effective synergies between research lines and actors involved? How big is the risk that IOB's collective profile becomes unclear in international academies? How do you test the relevance in a broad framework, especially in terms of research needs? To what extent is this approach conducive to increased impact? More fundamentally, the question also arises to what extent IOB will fill in the concept itself of 'development studies' (and doctorates around this) in the near future - given the rapid changes in the landscape for international cooperation, and greater multi, inter and trans-disciplinarity in academic 'development studies'.

In the discussion IOB recognizes the relevance of these questions. Reconciling these various aspects remains a "*balancing act*", partly due to the existence of **centrifugal forces** associated with the chosen research approach. On the other hand, IOB notes that there are catalysts to ensure a degree of **coherence** in the research part. In addition to the existing (soft) internal steering mechanisms, experience shows that maintaining a **regional focus** (e.g. Central Africa<sup>4</sup>) can create synergies in thematic choices, network building or profiling. Long-term North-South partnerships can also contribute to this. In terms of impact, everything depends to a large extent on the specific dynamics and cycle of a particular line of research, and a distinction should be made between impact on ways of thinking, on the one hand, and action on the other (i.e. 'instrumental impact'). Incidentally, the self-evaluation report states that IOB scores high in terms of the quality of the scientific outputs, but less so in terms of academic impact. This suggests that the building of international **academic networks** among peers could be strengthened.

The achievement of the research objectives is partly ensured by reserving a standard percentage of 40% of the time of the ZAP for research and qualitatively by various internal systems as well as the internationally constituted Scientific Advisory Board, which meets annually. However, there is an old problem here. The ZAP follow a 'tenure track' which causes the necessary work pressure and stress (especially the combination of family and career). This is stimulated by the competition under ZAP, which in turn creates 'incentives' to reduce the educational burden and not to take on internal management tasks.

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<sup>3</sup> SWOT-analysis IOB.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the SWOT analysis considers the clear integration of the focus on the Great Lakes within the broader IOB agenda as an asset.

#### 4. Service delivery or ... societal outreach

This is the third part of the IOB mission and a domain in full **evolution** and construction. Building on the recommendation of the previous visitation for a more structural and strategically driven approach, scientific and social services have made a leap forward in the past period. First of all at the conceptual level, with the switch to the concept of '**outreach**' as the new name for this core task. Strategically, various initiatives have been taken to embed outreach in the integrated (nexus) approach of IOB. Furthermore, the fragmented initiatives of the past were brought together in **seven categories** of outreach activities with varying degrees of explicitisation and policy direction (i.e. participation in public debate; external expertise in specialised institutions; embedded expertise from Northern partners; IOB visibility contributions; cooperation and capacity building from Southern partners; cooperation with the UAntwerp; establishment and/or active involvement in development spin-offs). To support the outreach, a **communication officer** was recruited for the first time. As mentioned earlier, the number of **consultancies** and externally funded research projects is increasing - with the accompanying challenge for IOB to ensure that they complement or strengthen its own research agenda.

This part of IOB's mandate is clearly work in progress with all kinds of trajectories underway - such as formulating a generic 'impact pathway' or modalities for reporting and evaluations. The Committee **encourages** IOB to give priority to this in the near future. In addition to the planned activities, it seems useful for IOB to further explore how the necessary '**incentives**' can be offered to staff to spend time and energy on the **vulgarisation** of the knowledge produced. This is not a luxury in times when 'fake news' increasingly influences public opinion and calls development cooperation into question. In the same logic, IOB could deepen the reflection on the conditions required for an effective outreach. For example, the committee believes that a more strategic steering of the partnerships in the North (now largely structured on an ad hoc basis) could contribute to this.

#### 5. Collaboration within and outside Flanders

IOB has a long tradition of cooperation with institutes in the **South**. These are either linked to IOB's DNA (with its geographical focus on Central Africa) or to the professional past or specific interests and networks of staff members (e.g. the long-standing collaboration with the Instituto Nitlapan of the Universidad Centroamericana). The Committee recognises the **importance** of these collaborations for the legitimacy of IOB as a Northern institute, for the relevance of education and research, for offering field experience to students or for all kinds of exchanges and joint initiatives.

As noted in previous visits, the **northern work** also remains a less structured and prioritised story to this day. There are a series of institutional relationships but these are mainly organised on an ad hoc basis, driven by specific needs and opportunities. The Committee understands that strengthening these institutional links poses various challenges (in terms of strategic choices, prioritisation, management, capacity, time available, etc.) and does not necessarily provide a 'return on investment' in the short term. However, it seems desirable for IOB to make clear choices in this respect (in a rapidly evolving and competitive landscape) and to determine to what extent a more strategic management of these Belgian and international networks can strengthen IOB's **branding** and **outreach**. This is confirmed by the SWOT analysis of the self-evaluation, in which IOB acknowledges the risk of "underinvestment in activities with high societal impact".

#### 6. Student management

This is an area where the maturity of IOB is fully reflected and one can speak of **consolidated internal processes**. The organisation in terms of student management is at the pinnacle after years of learning and refining the approach. As in previous visits, students express great **satisfaction** with the general atmosphere in IOB and the dedicated and professional guidance ‘across the board’. With regard to education, students find that there is “quite some freedom” to make choices within the masters and accompanying modules. The consultations also showed great support for the initiated deepening of the alumni policy in the field of follow-up, networking, evaluation of the outreach/impact of alumni in their working environment and involvement in further IOB research and related publications. As one participant put it well: *“IOB is inciting us to do things in our own societies and work contexts and to bring out the language of development to wider audiences”*.

It is also interesting to note that the students consulted appreciate - perhaps more than in the past - the way IOB deals with ‘complexity’ and ‘diversity’. According to them, there is a great **openness** at IOB level to ask fundamental questions about ‘development’ in certain modules, without ideological or North-South biases. **Diversity** exists at different levels such as: (i) students from different countries and cultures; (ii) the ‘contents’ and themes offered (with a wide range of perspectives); and (iii) the methods used (quantitative/qualitative, political economy analyses, etc.). There is a strong expectation among students/alumni that IOB will further invest in intercultural dialogue (with accompanying codes of conduct), in effective partnerships in the South (with more opportunities for exchange and mutual fertilization, including through joint masters) and in a diversification of staff within IOB. Or as suggested by one participant: *“IOB could be a meeting place and laboratory of different and potentially conflicting world views on how to tackle today’s global problems”*.

## 7. Staff management

In this area, too, IOB has done a great deal of work over the past decade to create a favourable institutional environment in order to fully optimise the quality and expertise of its staff (at all levels). According to the Committee, all the necessary internal processes and human resources management systems are now formally in place and functioning.

However, the problem lies in the informal culture of IOB. During the visit it was noted that IOB may have been driven by **“too much ambition”** and now globally runs at *“125% of its capacity”*. This also applies to the administrative staff who react enthusiastically to the growth of IOB, but at the same time note that it is not easy to cope with the increased workload (e.g. regarding the supervision of doctorates). The challenge for the future is to avoid situations of ‘burn out’ of staff. With this in mind, the Committee wholeheartedly supports IOB’s attempt to strive for **‘sustainable excellence’**, a concept that is put forward in the self-evaluation, partly by leaving room for a flexible interpretation per person of the range of tasks and associated workload.

## 8. Quality assurance, management and policy

Building on previous reviews, the committee was able to conclude that the IOB processes regarding quality assurance, management and policy have been strongly **consolidated** over the years and can generally be regarded as ‘controlled systems’ (in line with IOB’s self-assessment). The committee’s question is more **forward-looking**: to what extent can the IOB management also strategically address all the changes described above, such as ensuring continued relevance in ‘development studies’, broadening the research themes, mitigating the possible negative effects of growth, etc.



## 9. Financial management

There are no specific comments in this respect. IOB continues to demonstrate good financial management and has been able to mobilise an increasing volume of external funding in recent years. The gradual development of IOB over the past two decades into a **stable, professional organisation** with a learning culture that succeeds in being a credible and relevant actor at Belgian and international level, is mainly due to the availability of **predictable institutional funding**. The committee is of the opinion that the Flemish Community gets ‘**value for money**’ with its investment in IOB.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As in previous reviews, the committee was able to establish a high level of **continuity in the performance** of IOB as a whole. The institute continues to demonstrate that it is a learning organisation that takes the recommendations of evaluations and other feedback initiatives seriously. IOB also shows a real capacity to make concrete policy and operational adjustments to its operations if necessary. This applies both to internal processes to ensure core tasks, and to external challenges the Institute faces. Over the years, the institute has also been able to build up its own ‘DNA’ that has a binding force. The choice to grant autonomy to staff is a good example of this. This has led to a management culture that is open and decentralised and has proved beneficial for the motivation, creativity and commitment of staff members at all levels.

Partly as a result of this, IOB has evolved over the years into a **mature and professional** institute that succeeds in carrying out its triple mission globally in a successful and increasingly integrated (nexus) way, to the satisfaction of students, the UAntwerp, partners and staff members at all levels. The significant growth of IOB in the past period is a clear indicator of the degree of health of the organisation.

The committee confirms the relevance and quality of the education provided (in terms of content offered, practical focus, increasing input from Southern experts and institutions). The question does, however, arise as to whether there is a need for a further expansion of the number of options available to students. Also in the field of research, IOB has a lot to offer, especially a strong increase in qualitative outputs, a diversity of relevant themes (which are in line with the new agendas) and a greater mobilisation of Southern expertise, including that of alumni. However, without questioning the decentralised research approach, the commission encourages IOB to strengthen coherence and strategic direction, among other things by developing the Northern Partnerships aimed at greater impact and outreach.

For the next phase of the IOB’s institutional life cycle, the main challenge seems to be to ensure **sustainable growth** in several areas:

- At the level of individual staff members: how do you ensure ‘sustainable excellence’ and avoid ‘burn-outs’?
- On the level of internal decision-making: how do you set priorities as an institute and can you manage strategically in a decentralised structure and in a context of financial growth?
- As an institute as a whole: how do you position IOB in a rapidly evolving landscape for development and international cooperation? Where do you want to be in 10-15 years?
- In terms of IOB’s identity: how do the various processes of change respond to the organisation’s ‘DNA’ mentioned above (which is now a real asset)? What needs to be preserved, what needs to change?

The Committee does not advocate a normative approach to the above questions. One by one, these are reflections that are already underway within IOB and that are best explored further in the next few years. It is important that these reflections result in an enhanced sense of purpose. According to the committee,

IOB needs to do this in view of all the changes that have recently been initiated or implemented and the many external challenges mentioned above.

Various examples can be given of existing '**construction sites**' that could be strengthened by further clarifying the objectives pursued and providing a clear 'sense of purpose'. How do you best cooperate with the new generation of ZAP and develop a shared agenda there? The expanded operation with alumni has great potential, but what do you really want to achieve with it? How far will you go in the development of southern and northern partnerships and what added value are you looking to offer or insure there? What are the implications of the '*IOB Going Global*' process (also for the future composition of IOB educational staff)? What social positioning are you trying to achieve with the increasing outreach activities and with what goal in mind are you investing in this? To what extent is IOB also trying to be a player that wants to directly influence the rapidly evolving way of thinking and acting on development? And what does this mean for the further development of the nexus education research outreach?

These are not easy questions, but they will require clearer answers in the coming years. All actors in the development sector face similar challenges. However, the Committee believes that IOB has many strengths to tinker with in the future. Or as the chairman of the commission summarised it at the end of the informal review: "*you are ready to face the future*".