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The Public Oriented Services of the Royal Museum for Central Africa

Peer review report - Summary



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Cover: RMCA's general presentation of its renovation, picture of the model with on the left the new welcome pavilion.

Summary

The Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) is one of the 10 Belgian Federal Scientific Institutes (FSIs) that depend on the State Secretary responsible for Science Policy. The Belgian Science Policy Office (BELSPO) organised an evaluation of all FSIs in order to support the Institutes in the development and determination of their research, services and outreach strategy.

In 2014/15 this work started with an evaluation of the scientific strategy and scientific services of the RMCA. This evaluation was performed by Technopolis. At that moment, the public oriented services of RMCA were not part of the evaluation assignment to Technopolis. Since at all other FSIs an evaluation of all activities was performed, Belspo asked Technopolis to evaluate the public oriented services of the RMCA as well.

Since the museum in Tervuren has been closed for renovation since 2013 (it will open in 2018) the past period has not been representative of the functioning of the RMCA. It was therefore decided to limit the evaluation to a self-assessment by RMCA on their Public Oriented Services and a peer review by external experts to discuss this self-assessment and the future plans for the museum. The aim of the peer review was to review the public oriented services strategy of the RMCA. This report presents the findings from the Panel:

1. The review team is impressed by the substantial efforts of the team at the RMCA to realise the new museum.
2. The opening of the museum is not only the end of a process to (re)build a museum but also a new start to achieve a better future for Belgium and Central Africa with the involvement of the RMCA.
3. The ongoing transition and the potential stimulus for further development and continuous improvement of the RMCA require more stability in financial support, more autonomy in the running of the institution, and more flexibility in allocating resources and staff within current budgets than the present Belgian system for FSIs seems to allow.
4. One expects to see a clear and strong link between the museum and the research functions; however, a clear link between the two functions of the institution is not always present and recognised either internally or externally. More effort should be given to synchronize the agendas of both parts of the institution into an integral agenda. The peer review team finds that the public services as a whole, so not only the exhibitions, but also other public outlets (debates, events, meetings, performances etc.), could and should offer more opportunity for the research function in terms of valorisation.
5. The RMCA mission should reflect the history and culture of the institution as well as setting out a vision for the future. The existing mission of the RMCA feels unrepresentative of the unique potential that the RMCA offers. The peer review team feels that the current mission is too broad, too focused on the RMCA's history and too static.
6. The position of RMCA's educational service being widely appreciated as one of Belgium's first and best educational services should not change, hence care should be taken of the high dependency on external sources for operational cost of educational services. Education and learning are in the opinion of the peer review team an absolutely core function of the RMCA and should be seen not as a specific service, but as a defining theme across the institution.
7. In the opinion of the peer review team, the renovated museum will have to face, in a radically critical way, this colonial past and its numerous and persistent consequences until today, based on a scientific approach and discourse. It should not only be a "lieu de mémoire" for the Belgian colonial past, but also a place of memory for the diaspora and present citizens of Central Africa.
8. The RMCA is, because of its topic and history, a node of multi-culturality. In the opinion of the peer review team, the relation of the museum with people of African descent has much potential because of the new permanent display with its contemporary and critical representation of the colonial theme. The peer review team advises the RMCA to invest in this potential of expertise, leading information source, new audiences and positive discrimination. The RMCA has already accomplished a pioneering work in the involvement of diasporas in the museum: one-off projects such as "Africa-Tervuren", the creation of a structural advisory council (comraf) and high-level

projects for sharing experiences at European and international level such as Read-Me, RIME or SWITCH. This process should be supported and amplified within the framework of the new museum.

9. The peer review team recommends a 'sustainable' temporary exhibitions program as backbone of the marketing and trigger for repeated visits. It is through temporary exhibitions that a museum, any museum, can continue to develop new narratives, draw new and diverse audiences, and relate to actual and upcoming developments in its surrounding society.

The peer review team urges the museum to develop a rolling agenda of topics for temporary exhibitions. Such a longer term rolling agenda of exhibitions will contribute to the alignment of research agendas and exhibition agendas, and may have benefits for research and exhibitions.

The peer review team finds that although contemporary art can be important as a way to bring new voices, its importance should not be overestimated. Such initiatives run a risk of being rather isolated with limited societal significance and be seen as primarily disruptive within the museum as a whole. However, initiatives, such as residences of contemporary artists that explore and interact with the museum's collections, deserve attention if they can broaden audiences and enhance collections and showcase certain aspects of contemporary creation in connection with today's Africa.

10. The peer review team is aware of the serious shortages in staff and budget that the RMCA faces. Most museums outside Belgium which face shortages or have to deal with budget cuts, have much more autonomy for the museum management to adapt the programme of activities, staffing, the type of contracts, the use of savings and the balance between research and public functions. In those aspects, the situation in which the RMCA has to work is worse than that of its European museum peer group. Hopefully, the funding and governmental institutions involved with the RMCA are willing to consider at least to give the management more flexibility in how to run the institution as a matter of urgency.

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