

CERES
midterm evaluation
report

2007

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1. Background

Since 1993 research institutes/schools have been the main programming organisations for university funded research and for PhD training in the Netherlands. CERES is a problem-oriented institute/school in the field of study of global societal transformation. The core members include senior researchers from social and geographical disciplines and from related specialisations in economics and agro-ecological studies from different Dutch academic institutions.

The CERES mission is built around three elements:

- to initiate research and to co-ordinate a research programme in its field of study,
- to train a new generation of professional researchers and
- to form knowledge networks for capacity building and to disseminate scientific knowledge and expertise.

The CERES programme has eight major research themes or working programmes. The PhD training offers a four-year training programme leading to a PhD thesis; the programme combines coursework and field activities, individual tuition and supervision.

Research institutes/schools require formal accreditation by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW). In 1994 CERES received its first accreditation, with a subsequent re-accreditation in 1999 and 2004. The present re-accreditation period ends January 1, 2010. To obtain renewal, the KNAW has requested all research institutes/schools to organize an evaluation by (international) experts in the field.

2. Advisory committee

The board of CERES installed an international advisory committee, (IAC) to carry out an independent (midterm) assessment.

The international advisory committee consisted of:

- professor Wiecher Zwanenburg, chair (Utrecht University)
- professor Ralph Grillo (University of Sussex)
- professor Björn Hettne (School of Global Studies, Göteborg University)
- professor Charles Okidi (University of Nairobi)
- professor Carole Rakodi (University of Birmingham)

The committee was assisted by dr. Wil Pansters and drs. Lolita van Toledo, who acted as the committee's secretaries.

3. Working procedure

In January 2007 the committee members received the self-study documents. Each member individually studied and evaluated the documents, guided by a short set of questions formulated by the chair of the committee. After having studied these documents, each member sent the chair his/her first reaction. On the basis of these first reactions, the chair prepared a short checklist with questions for the site visit to follow.

On 28 February, 1 and 2 March, the committee stayed in Utrecht for a three-day site visit. The schedule of this visit included sessions with CERES researchers (from all the working programmes), PhD students, the directorate, the board, and the Development Policy Review Network (see section 6). At the end of this site visit the Committee presented its preliminary evaluation and conclusions to members of the CERES Board. The Committee's secretariat prepared a draft of the final report. After receiving comments from the committee members, the report was finalised in April 2007 and will be presented to the board and directorate of CERES.

The committee is grateful for the open atmosphere in which all the discussions took place.

4. Overall impressions

To start with the committee wishes to mention a number of partially interrelated positive impressions of CERES.

It is clear that CERES has succeeded in creating a community for international development studies at the national level. As such it has functioned as an important network for both PhD students and senior members, as well as an organizational platform that has been able to defend and promote the scholarly interests of a research community in the Netherlands that otherwise would have suffered serious setbacks.

The prestige which CERES has obtained and which has enabled it to function in this way is based on quality. The committee believes that the PhD training programme, especially its first year, deserves special mention in this respect. The quality of research and research output is already impressive and much is of high international standard. The committee positively values the efforts of CERES to devise a sound quality assessment system and to continually improve its performance. Therefore, the committee believes that CERES has rightly earned the academic legitimacy (formally acknowledged by the accreditation of the KNAW) that enables it to play a leading role with respect to the participating institutions, as well as in the wider institutional contexts of higher education and international development.

5. Research: perspectives, boundaries and organization

A dynamic research field

In recent years research activities in CERES have undergone a number of changes as a result of substantial shifts occurring in the modern world and of modifications in the CERES research community itself. New themes and concepts have emerged, and boundaries of the research field of CERES have shifted. These changes are also reflected in CERES' renewed mission statement., which the committee values as interesting and important for the coming years, though it will obviously need to be kept under continual review and further refined.

The committee believes that the decision to reformulate CERES' core domain of study in terms of global social transformation opens up a challenging and promising field of research, that fits the developing international research agenda well. The committee also believes that CERES' unique plural and multidisciplinary composition places it in a favourable position to further understanding of the complexity of global social transformations, on the basis of both theoretical and empirical work that concentrates on the linkages between global and local processes of change and resource dynamics.

The shifting and broadening research landscape of CERES raises two important issues. Firstly, the committee wishes to encourage the direction taken by CERES towards openness and flexibility, for example by bridging the erstwhile strict North-South divide. The committee also strongly supports the establishment of working relations with other significant research domains, such as (international) law and human rights. However, and secondly, these research dynamics inevitably raise the issue of the boundaries of CERES' research domain. Uncritically opening up CERES would constitute serious risks to the school's coherence and identity. The committee believes that caution is needed in order to avoid programmatic overstretching. The benchmark for CERES boundary-making must lie in the degree to which research projects and initiatives concern the analysis of global social transformation and the global-local nexus.

Research themes such as international migration, transnationalism, diasporas and multiculturalism can thus be accommodated within CERES. The committee argues that this benchmark is justified because, while the vocabulary in CERES has changed, the underlying core domain of research in CERES is and should be delimited by the critical agenda of international development.

Organizing research

CERES has, since its inception, organised its varied research agenda into working programmes (now consolidated in eight programmes). First, the committee was reassured that much of the research carried out within these programmes was of a high standard as judged by CERES' own research evaluation methodology and other internationally accepted criteria. Second, the committee has learned about the great diversity currently existing within CERES: working programmes differ in terms of methodological orientation, disciplinary composition, thematic

scope and coherence, institutional representation, size, organizational development, scholarly agenda setting, involvement with PhD training and active engagement with CERES' overall research mission. The committee believes that this diversity reflects the school's multidisciplinary and multi-local nature and that as such it should be valued. The existence of diverging and competing theoretical positions and methodological traditions forms a good basis for intellectual debate and development. The committee therefore subscribes to the view expressed in a previous evaluation report, which is widely supported within CERES, that no uniform or overarching theoretical model is required within the boundaries sketched above.

The committee believes that if CERES allows conceptual broadness, organisational diversity should also be permitted. However, its positive appraisal of the diversity of working programmes in CERES is conditional on each programme's capacity to renew its intellectual agenda, build a scholarly community around its work and critically reflect on its relation to CERES' overall mission and objectives. The committee has noted that some working programmes exhibit symptoms of becoming fossilized and/or too diffuse. The committee believes that working programmes or, for that matter, other organizational units of a relatively permanent nature (see below) should be able to demonstrate a thematic and programmatic *coherence*, a *commitment* to bringing people together and challenging them intellectually, and an orientation towards *adaptation* on the basis of continual and critical reflection about their research objects and theorization, i.e. intellectual innovation. In sum, the committee emphasizes the need for renewal within and between working programmes, and the board and the directorate, together with the CERES membership at large, should ensure that the conditions necessary for achieving intellectual coherence and renewal are facilitated. In relation to working programme 4 on economic reforms and sustainable development, the committee is of the opinion that it should be given an opportunity to prove that it can develop a coherent intellectual agenda and the minimum size necessary for its survival.

The committee has also learned about the success of project groups, previously known as pathways-groups.¹ These groups are mostly task-oriented (conference, publication, grant proposal, etc) and operate on a temporary basis, although the committee can envisage a longer-term existence for some. They can, for example, enable CERES members to respond to emerging research issues, minority research interests and issues that overlap working programmes. In intellectual and scholarly terms they are vigorous. The committee feels that the formation and facilitation of (new) project groups should be encouraged, but that they are not necessarily an alternative to working programmes, which are more enduring, enabling thematic research communities and networks to be developed. Nevertheless, a critical review of the functioning of project groups should enable CERES to identify best practices that will also be useful for the renewal of working programmes.

The committee wishes to recommend a number of mechanisms for enhancing the conditions it believes will generate the intellectual vigour CERES requires to meet its challenging overall research questions and objectives. It does so in the conviction that instituting such mechanisms requires the involvement of the different governing bodies in CERES and the research community at large, as well as open communication between them. In this manner, it is believed that a sense of shared responsibility and ownership will emerge. The committee believes that a line of action that concentrates on the substance of scholarly work about different elements of global social transformation will be instrumental in renewing research agendas, commitment and membership as well as research organisation. Possible actions in this direction are:

- a. Working programmes could be invited to produce a document that reflects on scholarly debates in their fields and on their prospective scholarly development for the coming five years, taking into account their relationship to CERES as a whole and to other thematic clusters. An additional question would relate to how cross-cutting debates could be enhanced.
- b. In order to counteract the problem of thematic diffuseness and excessively wide scope, particularly in the large working programmes, CERES might engage in an dialogue about the possibilities of rearranging the current distribution of research themes in the eight working programmes, in a way that opens up opportunities for the creation of new and *more focused research units, with adjustable boundaries*.

The committee emphasizes that the overall objective of such an effort should be on improving the conditions for intellectual renewal and debate.

- c. CERES could promote and facilitate the organization of bi-annual conferences in which the different organizational units (working programmes or otherwise) report on the evolution of their research activities and engage in an intellectual debate.
- d. CERES could promote and facilitate the formation of a project-group/task-force that will investigate and report on the scholarly proceedings of each constituent unit and identify areas of cross-cutting interest and debate.

CERES has done well in obtaining accreditation in 1994 and re-accreditation from the KNAW in 1999 and 2004. It has gained academic and administrative legitimacy from this. Continuation and consolidation of this status is important. The committee is of the opinion that part of the documentation for the midterm evaluation, especially regarding the working programmes, is of an uneven quality (in certain instances information about projects and project funding is poorly presented, and there is a lack of clarity and consistency in titles and research questions). Therefore, the committee wishes to recommend that the documentation for the next evaluation and accreditation round be improved and standardized on the basis of the best practices demonstrated in the 2007 midterm review. Alternative research units, such as the project groups, also require more systematic attention

¹ In passing the committee recommends that CERES adopt the consistent use of one term for such groups in order to avoid confusion within and outside the network.

6. CERES in context

The committee believes that possible organizational modifications of CERES' research architecture should be evaluated against contextual developments.

CERES operates in a multi-layered institutional environment that is characterized by different, sometimes conflicting tendencies, developments and shifts. The committee believes that the system of research schools is going through a period of transition that opens up some opportunities and restricts others.

The committee acknowledges the broad tendency within the institutions that participate in CERES to deal with the scholarly and administrative processes that surround research activities and PhD training programmes at the local level. Since this creates tensions and poses a threat to the intellectual vitality of the research school, the committee wishes to endorse the role CERES plays in countering such tendencies of parochialization. In this context, the committee points to the added value of the interlocal and interdisciplinary networking opportunities CERES offers to its (individual) members. Even if the localization is consolidated institutionally, the committee can see no reason why researchers cannot be members of both local and national research schools at the same time.

The committee appreciates the role CERES plays in the reformulation of the priorities of relevant national funding agencies, most importantly WOTRO, and recommends that CERES continues to do so. The committee is reassured by the fact that in future the allocation of WOTRO funds will be balanced between policy-driven research agendas and other research initiatives. The committee believes that this situation creates opportunities for the wide range of research groups inside CERES.

A core objective of CERES is to further the links between the scholarly understanding of global social transformation and policy-making. The committee therefore welcomes the foundation of the Development Policy Review Network in 2005. The fundamental objective of this network is to strengthen the relationships between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners in the world of international development, and as such it is an avenue for expanding social science input into policy-making processes. The committee was impressed by the optimism and purposefulness in DPRN and encourages CERES and its partners to seize the opportunities the network provides.

Firstly, the committee points to comparable experiences abroad, which show that when researchers engage in a substantial and comprehensive debate with policy-makers about the complex relationship between social science research and policy-making (including fundamental questions about what constitutes policy relevant social science research), this can also be important for their own intellectual agenda. Putting time and effort into the DPRN is likely to

generate incentives for research groups and institutions within CERES, and could be a fruitful experience.

Secondly, the committee wishes to stress the networking potential of DPRN between academics, policy-makers and practitioners, especially for young CERES members who, by making use of their social-science training, can gain access to professional opportunities in non-academic organizations in the field of international development. The committee feels that the materialization of these professional opportunities could be improved by providing additional professional training in the last half of the PhD training programme, geared at obtaining specific skills and competencies that are valued in the world of policy-making and development practice.

Finally, the committee trusts that the DPRN as a whole will attach importance to the intellectual debates within CERES. As explained above, the committee believes that CERES needs to invest in activities and mechanisms that ensure the revitalisation of its intellectual agenda and recommends that it examines the possibilities for this within the framework of DPRN, which can potentially mobilize not only intellectual but also –and this is not without importance- financial input.

The committee considers that CERES acts in some respects as a professional organization, and asks whether CERES and CERES members should strengthen their role and interventions in public debate and public opinion formation. Increasing the research school's visibility might improve its overall positioning in the broader contexts of international development policy and practice, attempts to improve understanding of global social transformation and academic institutional restructuring..

The committee has learned of CERES' ambitions with respect to internationalization of its activities. The committee has no doubts about the international character of CERES: intellectually CERES is firmly embedded in international networks for research cooperation at the individual and research group levels. Also a considerable part of its yearly PhD contingent comes from abroad. However, due to limited CERES human and financial resources, the committee suggests a cautious approach to further international initiatives, with the exception of CERES' role in Europe, for example with respect to accreditation.

7. PhD training

The committee sees a good future for CERES' PhD training. The list of PhD topics shows an interesting range of projects. The PhD training programme looks solid, especially the first year training. The committee values the comments of the representatives of the recently installed PhD council: the Research Design module constitutes an important training opportunity for PhD students who have just embarked on their PhD programmes, but is also useful for more advanced students, since it enables them to refine proposals that have already been prepared.

The presentation tutorials are highly valued, because research proposals are actively debated and commented on. They also fulfil an intellectual and social function in creating links between students. Both the PhD council and the committee appreciate the way CERES is willing to support initiatives by PhD students themselves to organize training sessions and courses. Despite this overall positive judgement, the committee believes there are possibilities for further improvement. The committee supports the PhD students' suggestion that it would be useful to offer assistance for those students who have to do a nine-month assessment. More importantly, the committee believes that CERES should consider developing more training opportunities during the post-fieldwork period, not only in the areas of organizing data and the writing process but also, as noted above, in preparing students for their future careers. These could be organized by CERES centrally or in cooperation with the participating institutions.

The committee has gained the impression that coordination and communication between students towards the end of the first year and the period after fieldwork should be enhanced. There seems to be confusion with respect to both the extent to which the participating institutions are committed to opening up their training facilities for all CERES PhD students and the role that CERES working programmes play in PhD training. The committee believes the development of the PhD council is important to enhance communication between PhD students and both the working programmes and the participating institutions.

8. Conclusion

The committee is of the opinion that CERES has developed a challenging central theme, which while requiring continual refinement and renewal, constitutes a sound basis on which to build in the years to come., even if circumstances are sometimes difficult.

The committee feels that CERES has the potential to adjust its organizational structure of working programmes and project groups where necessary, in order to ensure the continued development and renewal of its intellectual agenda.

The committee also appreciates the way in which the PhD training is organized and CERES' readiness to improve certain elements of it.

CERES' openness to the surrounding world of researchers, policy makers and practitioners, particularly the development of the DPRN, augur well for the future vitality of the research school.