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Evaluation of the Public Services of the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (RBINS)

Management summary



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Judith Vermeer (Project leader)

Anke Nooijen

Ivette Oomens

Loic Perroud

Apolline Terrier

Frank Zuijdam

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Summary

This evaluation report presents the findings of Technopolis Group in the evaluation of the museum of the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (RBINS), one of the Federal Scientific Institutes (FSIs) of Belgium. The missions of the FSIs are twofold. On the one hand, they aim to perform fundamental and applied research. On the other hand, they are to deliver public services, such as museum activities, collection conservation, etc.

The evaluations of the FSIs were commissioned by the Belgian Science Policy Office (BELSPO) to Technopolis Group. The evaluation period is in principle 2005-2016, although it should be noted that in some cases it was not possible to obtain relevant data all the way back to 2005. Moreover, in a few cases we had more recent information (2016).

This report is based on various sources of information, including desk research, interviews with management staff of RBINS, a focus group with RBINS staff, interviews with external stakeholders, an analysis of financial and HR data, two case studies, two international benchmarks, an analysis of media data, and a Mystery Review. A key component of the evaluation was a peer review exercise, which took place 6–18 November 2016. Lastly, it should be noted that the scientific part of RBINS was already evaluated by Technopolis Group in 2016. This evaluation also included an assessment of the collections. Therefore, this evaluation focuses solely on the *public services and museum function* of RBINS.

Background

RBINS, at that time called the Royal Natural History Museum, was founded on 31 March 1846 as the descendant of the Musée de Bruxelles of 1802. Within the current federal government, the responsibility for science policy lies with the State Secretary for Combating Poverty, for Equal Opportunities, for Disabled People, and for Science Policy, in charge of Larger Towns, attached to the Minister of Finance. A separate administration, the Federal Science Policy Office (BELSPO), is responsible for coordinating science policy at the federal level.

The museum currently consists of 16,000 square meters of permanent halls, halls for temporary exhibitions, educative ateliers and all kinds of public spaces. 9,000 m² is for the open exhibition halls, 2,000 m² is under construction to be re-opened in 2018, and approximately 5,000m² consists of space open to the public, including communication halls, stairs, sanitary, and other facilities. The collection has around 37 million preserved specimens. The Museum receives 300,000 visitors annually and has a large international network. The Museum is renowned for its Dinosaur Gallery, which is the largest in Europe because of its size and number of specimens. The gallery has a surface area of 3000m² and dozens of specimens.

Similar to many history museums in Europe, the mission of RBINS is “*to actively contribute to a better knowledge of nature and to actively disseminate this knowledge for the protection of the nature*” (laid down by the Management Plan). Further, RBINS aims to produce high quality research, to enhance the accessibility of science, and to contribute to a positive public perception of nature. The Institute has four strategic objectives, namely to conduct scientific research, provide scientific services, collection management, and dissemination of knowledge and public engagement. It is the latter strategic goals that the *Museum* of RBINS focuses on and that is currently being evaluated.

Infrastructure

RBINS has invested significantly in renovating the Museum (including all the exhibition areas and general spaces of the building). While these renovations led to a considerable upgrading of the Museum, many aspects of the building are still outdated or not functioning. The problem at the basis of these issues is the fact that the building is not owned by the Museum itself, but the Building Agency

of the Federal Government. The dependency and the Agency's limited resources and capacity mean that there are significant delays in renovation works. This has serious consequences for the Museum. The current building and infrastructure do not offer visitors a warm welcome and nice experience. The signage can also be improved. The building of the Museum is somewhat hidden behind the European Parliament, Signing and advertising the museum in the streets and from the square in front of the parliament could be improved to help (potential) visitors notice the Museum.

Strategy

RBINS is a well-known institution and a leader in its field of expertise. As a unique federal research institute, RBINS is clearly well represented in the Belgian landscape. However, there seems to be some imbalance between the two tasks of the Institute: research and the museum. The amount of budget allocated for research and related staff positions makes the museum almost a 'side business'. Some stakeholders consider the museum as a form of (visual) output for the research activities rather than a unique medium to inspire and involve visitors in the world of nature. The evaluation concludes that if RBINS wants to develop a strong museum brand in a competitive leisure market, it needs to develop a clear branding strategy that is separate from the branding of RBINS as a research institute — with a clear identity for the museum (name, logo, etc.). A strong brand would help the Museum to enhance its identity and visibility, to enlarge the scope of its activities, to attract new and more visitors.

Governance structure, management and organisation

The FSIs operate in a complex context. FSIs have a relatively high administrative burden and low flexibility. They must follow the rules for federal organisations, which are designed for government administrations, and not for museums or scientific institutes. Obstacles are found in financial rules, rules in relation to housing, and in rules in relation to HRM (esp. hiring and promoting staff). Although the government announced changes that will increase the autonomy, these changes have not yet been implemented, and it is unknown how these will affect the functioning of the FSIs.

Since 2013, a reorganisation of the public function of the Institute was implemented. One separate Operational Directorate (OD Public) was created for all public activities. This OD includes various services for education, exhibitions, museology, communication, visitor's services, and the museum shop. While it could be argued that the exhibitions and museology services could be merged into one unit, generally this reorganisation constituted a clear improvement of the organisation of the public activities. The creation of one Public OD helped the internal coordination and cooperation between services.

Despite this positive development, this evaluation finds that there are still a few areas for further improvement. There is a pressing need to create a marketing, partnerships and sponsorships team to address strategic issues. This team should operate under the direct supervision of the General Director and not be part of the communication team, as it is currently defined in the organisation structure. Moreover, we recommend setting up a new department focused on marketing, partnerships and sponsorships.

Budget and human resources

The largest share of RBINS' income is the BELSPO staff envelop and general dotation. The Museum income represents a relatively small part of the Institute's overall income, namely 15,8% (€5,277,160 in 2015 compared to €33,360,000 of the overall Institute). The decreasing budget was a recurrent topic during the evaluation. Staff indicated that due to the budget cuts at federal level and the decrease of the number of visitors due to the terrorist attacks in 2015 and 2016, RBINS faced some significant difficulties in the past few years. They explained that the Institute has had to implement several budget saving measures to deal with the decreasing budget. Staff feared that more budget cuts would lead to serious issues in terms of the quality and results of the services. What stands out is that the Museum has no dedicated person for sponsoring and subsidies. Consequently, very little time and efforts are invested in this important activity (to enhance income from external sources).

In terms of human resources, the OD Public had a total of 52,3 FTE, spread over 62 staff members in 2016. Overall, there is a good balance within this Operational Department with 30 Dutch-speaking and 32 French-speaking staff members. While staff were generally satisfied with the HR policy, there were two areas for improvement. First, as a ‘State Institution with independent management’, RBINS has limited autonomy in the recruitment of new staff. As a consequence, recruitment procedures often take too long, which causes problems in terms of fulfilling the day-to-day tasks and responsibilities of the services. Second, staff indicated that the appraisal system could be further improved. Staff indicated that there is currently little room to reward high performing staff.

Educational activities

The museum offers diverse educational activities in format, nature and context to a range of different target groups. These include guided tours in the Museum, various types of workshops, holiday camps, outdoor activities, public events, etc. In addition to the activities within the Museum, the Institute also reaches out to audiences that may not (be able to) come to Brussels. XperiLAB and XperiBIRD are examples of highly successful outdoor activities.

The educational activities are particularly appreciated by school and families. The museum is considered a good partner for schools, taking the curricula into consideration when developing its activities. However, the Museum has been less successful at attracting adults and tourists. This might be linked to the fact that the Museum needs urgent modernisation of the common areas, the confusing identity of the Museum, and the lack of a strong trademark, all of which might hinder the dissemination and internationalisation of the brand.

While there is demand for much more educational activities (especially from schools), the Museum currently does not have sufficient facilities (e.g. rooms for workshops) and staff to provide more activities. The renovation Master Plan foresees 2 new rooms that will allow an increased offer, but this additional capacity seems too limited in view of the demand for educational activities. A potential solution regarding staff could be to invest more in volunteers.

Exhibitions

The RBINS has one of the largest and most important collections of natural sciences in the world with 37 million specimens. A small, but rather important, part of this collection is displayed in the permanent exhibitions of the RBINS Museum. The nine permanent exhibitions and one (changing) temporary exhibition cover topics including biodiversity, evolution, humankind, dinosaurs, mosasaurs, minerals, shells, and insects. In total, the exhibition spaces are 11,130m². The exhibitions are of high quality and may be considered among the best of their kind. The specimens/objects displayed demonstrate incontrovertibly that RBINS is one of the most important natural sciences museums in Europe.

However, the annual number of visitors to the Museum (ca. 300,000 visitors/year) is relatively low compared to the natural history museums of other capital cities in Europe. Moreover, there is an overrepresentation of primary school groups and families with children. The Museum still has a strong reputation as a dinosaur museum for children, and attracts a relatively small number of adults (not accompanying children), elderly, and tourists to the Museum. A second issue was that the proportion of Belgian visitors is much larger than foreign visitors (tourists), despite its location in the centre of Brussels. The development of a clear strategy for the temporary exhibitions, with explicit consideration for the specific target audiences, may help to attract more and different types of audiences.

Communication activities

RBINS has a very well-advanced communication service, that makes use of a wide range of offline and online communication tools and channels. The Museum has close relations with journalists which is reflected in the high number of press releases. It also performed very well in terms of their use of social media, with a high number of Facebook visitors, likes, tweets, etc.). The results of these activities are visible in the online media-analysis. Compared to the other FSIs, the Museum was mentioned in more

online articles, had more Facebook followers, and more tweets (except for the Royal Museum for Fine Arts, which had more tweets than RBINS).

However, in order to enhance the visibility of the Museum, there is a need for a new dual branding strategy: two brands (RBINS and Museum) with a clear identity for the museum. RBINS has had to decide on the core of the Museum's brand. Is it natural history, dinosaurs, biodiversity or learning about the planet? The new brand has to be communicated to different audiences. Moreover, in terms of the types of visitors of the Museum, clear differentiation in the communication activities and tailor-made communication activities and channels for specific target audiences may help to further diversify the Museum's visitors.

The Museum Shop

The Museum Shop offers a collection of articles and gifts. The shop's activity resulted in an overall turnover of € € 357,501 in 2015, a quasi-status quo compared with the previous year (+ € 287.97). This 2015 result was similar to 2014 (+0.08%). It was a relatively good result given the disruption caused by a week of closure in 2015. Nevertheless, in order to further enhance the performance of the shop and related sales activities, a clear marketing strategy could be developed. Extra budget should be found by increasing the customer/visitor ratio. A new shop could be installed next to the rebuilt entrance, which would help the Museum to increase its income, with a clear division between a bookstore and a shop with articles sold for targeted audience like children and families.

Positioning and collaborations

RBINS is the Natural Sciences Museum of Belgium, and is recognised as such by all relevant partners in the field, both in Belgium and at international level. The Museum brought prestigious partnerships and positive national and international collaborations. The collaboration with Solvay on XperiLab.be and the partnership with Google are examples of very successful collaborations. The Museum also has collaborations with many of the other relevant museums, science centres, and FSIs in Belgium.

At international level, the Museum had several collaborations in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, the UK, and Canada. Among others, RBINS engaged in exchanges of exhibitions and co-productions of exhibitions. It also engaged in collaborations and networks at EU and international level, including the European Network of Science Centres (ECSITE) and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Belgium Wallonia-Brussels and ICOM Belgium Flanders.

Nevertheless, the evaluation findings suggest that the positioning and collaborations can further be improved. There is currently no dedicated staff member for Marketing, Partnerships and Sponsorships. Moreover, the rebranding of the museum (a clear and simple brand for the Museum, separate from the Royal Institute) would likely have a positive impact on national and international positioning and support the visibility of the Museum activities.

Recommendations

In order to tackle these challenges, this evaluation makes the following recommendations for RBINS:

Recommendations in relation to the infrastructure:

- Position the customer at the heart of all public service. Create a structure that leads towards visitors being seen as 'customers'.
- Signage needs improvement (already under construction) and should start outside museum. (e.g. Dinosaur footprints from the EU parliament)
- Use the building site for positive communication and reclaim the front area from parking to a free garden place, related to the museum's theme.

- Reshape the hall entrance area into an inspiring place with public services: shop, restaurant, cloakroom, lockers etc. Consider that no ticket should be needed for the shop and restaurant. The upgraded Hall could also be a place for free donations, memberships, friends of the museum, communicating partners, etc.
- Emphasise the high expectation of the customer for high quality food and beverage, and create specific place(s) and picnic areas for schoolchildren and food brought by the customer.
- Emphasise the welcoming and departing process. Hospitality is very important.

Recommendations in relation to the management and strategy:

Emphasise the pivotal role and place of the Museum in the RBINS structure.

- Pivot the strategy to attract new audiences and visitors through a clear branding strategy for the museum. RBINS must create two separate brands for the Museum and the Research Institute. Rebranding should be completed before conclusion of the Master Plan.
- Continue to pursue the implementation of the existing plan for an urgent modernisation of the common areas (ticket office, welcome hall, cafeteria, shop, cloakroom, accesses, toilets, etc.).
- Merge service Exhibitions and Museology and create a new department focused on marketing, partnerships and sponsorships.

Recommendations in relation to the educational activities:

- Define the identity and the personality of the Museum based on the public that it wants to attract and create a strong brand from there.
- Involve audiences in the development of the activities and collaborate with institutions from other areas of knowledge in order to attract different audiences.
- Ensure that the staff of the Museum, especially the staff that interacts directly with the public, is representative of the city demography, in particular in origin and ethnicity.
- Increase and diversify the educational offer for families and individual visitors.
- Consider family tickets, family annual passes, loyalty or patron cards or other types of tickets that may increase repeat visits.
- Keep investing in tools to make visits more autonomous and independent of staff (like the interactive app and the online booking platform).
- Define strategies to attract volunteers to the Museum.

Recommendations in relation to the exhibitions:

- Create a general accessibility policy for the museum and take accessibility into consideration in the development phase of new exhibitions.
- Create an effective and simple signage and wayfinding system, taking accessibility into consideration. This should not be done independently of the rebranding of the Museum.
- The rebranding of the Museum must consider the target audiences that the Museum wants to reach.
- Define a strategy for temporary exhibitions that is focused on the identified target audiences. Explore cooperation with museums from other fields of knowledge, like art, history, ethnology, etc.

- In the future, modernisation of the building should account for ways to minimise or compensate for the architectural constraints of the temporary exhibitions room.
- Keep co-producing temporary exhibitions in collaboration with other museums.

Recommendations in relation to the communication activities:

- Make clear choices in branding and related communication for the institute. Empower the new branding with a strong campaign that can be connected to the overall renewal of the museum.
- Build on and invest in the already good online presence with a focus on different audiences. Identify target groups according to their nature or interests instead of broad and indistinct categories, and invest in the right social media for the specific customer (e.g. Instagram and apps).
- Adjust the website more to visitors and make it a sales tool.

Recommendations in relation to RBINS' positioning and collaboration:

- Emphasise the place of the Museum in the community (and with other institutions under the umbrella of the Ministry).
- Create new synergies with different typologies of museums (art, history, city, etc.).
- Position the Museum as an agora, centre of the city and place for dialogue.
- Develop projects involving scientists and citizens.

technopolis |group| United Kingdom
3 Pavilion Buildings
Brighton BN1 1EE
United Kingdom
T +44 1273 204320
E info@technopolis-group.com
www.technopolis-group.com

