

WIMEK Midterm Evaluation 2010

*prepared by the International Advisory Board (IAB)
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Preface

WIMEK has carried out a midterm review in the course of 2010. All WIMEK chair groups and the WIMEK research institute prepared self-evaluation reports in May 2010, with the exception of the Earth System Science and Climate Change group due to personal circumstances. The draft of each self-evaluation report was sent to two other WIMEK chair holders for collegial review, to improve the quality and harmonise the style of the documents. At the end of May the final versions of the self-evaluation reports were sent to the members of the International Advisory Board of WIMEK.

The International Advisory Board (IAB) consists of:

- Prof. Alex Zehnder (Emeritus Professor of Environmental Biotechnology at ETH Zurich);
- Prof. Wolfgang Cramer (Professor of Global Ecology, Potsdam University, and Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, Potsdam, Germany);
- Prof. Guy Brasseur (Associate Director for Research and Director of the "Earth-Sun Systems Laboratory" ESSL at NCAR);
- Prof. Philip Lowe (Professor of Rural Economy, University of Newcastle upon Tyne)

The IAB visited WIMEK on 9-10 June 2010. Unfortunately Prof. Guy Brasseur had to cancel his visit because of urgent other activities. The programme of the site visit consisted of one hour meetings (of two IAB members) with each WIMEK chair group (including poster presentations of PhD candidates), a meeting with the WIMEK Board and a meeting with selected WIMEK PhD candidates (see annex 1).

At the end of their visit, the WIMEK IAB presented their preliminary conclusions. They felt they would not be best used conducting a full reassessment of the research quality of the WIMEK chair groups. It was thought to be too soon after the 2007 review and the IAB does not have the full range of experts to conduct such a review. It was felt that it would be more helpful for the IAB to focus on its advisory and sounding board functions. The IAB were willing to offer their impressionistic assessments of the direction of travel of the chair groups.

In this report the IAB presents their evaluations, their suggestions for improvement of the performance of WIMEK and main conclusions.

Prof. Rik Leemans,
WIMEK Director

GENERAL COMMENTS

Role of the International Advisory Board

Wageningen with its University and Research Institutes is unique worldwide in its combination of fundamental academic work at a top international level and its application oriented choice of research topics, which are of significant societal and economical relevance. These topics are closely linked to national and European policy development and are strongly shaping international agendas. The International Advisory Board (IAB) is of the opinion that the formidable opportunities for Wageningen should be captured and exploited better than they are today. WIMEK has considerable potential and could superbly win a preeminent stature if the uniqueness of the Wageningen environment were more vigorously capitalized by all actors.

The review set-up for the IAB, which is based on research chairs/groups, does not serve WIMEK's interdisciplinary efforts particularly well. In addition, such discipline-oriented reviews may hamper or even prevent the use of the full potential of interdisciplinary collaboration within WIMEK in particular; it may even kill its development. To foster interdisciplinary interactions and knowledge, the IAB of WIMEK is ready to play the role of a peer and facilitator within this unique framework of Wageningen. The assessment of the disciplinary performance and quality is happily left to the Quality Assurance Netherlands Universities (QANU). It is desirable that the leadership of Wageningen University and of WIMEK accepts and honours this specific more interdisciplinary role for the IAB.

These reflections lead the IAB to modify its task. It first analyzed the USP (Unique Selling Point) for Wageningen and particularly for WIMEK, then explored the ways and instruments for realizing the full potential of WIMEK in the Wageningen environment, and finally reflected on its own future role in helping to achieve an even more effective performance in the future. To satisfy the administrative needs for a mid-term evaluation, the IAB will shortly comment on the status and advance of each chair group. However it will keep its comments to the essential issues that will allow for the progress of each chair group to be checked. The IAB has no intention to re-do what has already been done proficiently and thoroughly by the excellent and much larger peer group for SENSE in 2007.

Potentials of WIMEK in the framework of Wageningen: the uniqueness of being in Wageningen

Research in Wageningen has already in the past largely been geared to finding solutions to manage the environment rather than to treat it romantically and benignly. The approach in Wageningen was and still is largely pragmatic. The ambition of the Netherlands - to belong to the top nations in science and engineering - has left its traces as well in Wageningen. The University has assured that the scientific and technical quality of its groups was at a high level. The recent awards of two Spinoza grants to Wageningen, both associated with WIMEK, is a clear sign of the very high research quality.

Interactions between scientists and disciplines are facilitated by the size of the University. Earlier efforts to bring a broad range of disciplines together to deal comprehensively with the complexity of agricultural and environmental issues, was not always fully appreciated by the outside. As a consequence, complying primarily with the general disciplinary standards obstructed more comprehensive approaches of environmental issues. Nevertheless Wageningen University had and still has features and the stature of an “Environmental MIT”. Indeed, many of the questions and concepts which are now on the top of the global agenda had their origins in Wageningen or Wageningen played an important role in developing the necessary awareness. Examples are sustainable agriculture, converting agricultural waste to energy, aerobic/anaerobic treatment of waste streams and environmental contaminants, notions of ecological modernisation and sustainable consumption etc. Wageningen, with its University and Research Institutes, has always been internationally very well linked and often coordinated important international networks.

The IAB is convinced that WIMEK could become a beacon for interdisciplinary environmental research, provided that the necessary incentives are put in place. The IAB sees it as its duty to help such a development. In the following we summarize our thoughts of how WIMEK could achieve the necessary leadership.

Mechanisms to realize the full potential of WIMEK, incl. specific instruments

We take the purpose of WIMEK to be research coordination and quality assurance to help the participating research groups collectively achieve their full potential. The individual groups have their own specific strengths and would undoubtedly flourish and cooperate to varying degrees without the WIMEK framework. WIMEK’s added value is to give the chair groups a structured opportunity to collaborate and thereby achieve more than they could on their own.

The IAB recognises the uniqueness of the scale, quality and breadth of the research skills brought together in WIMEK focussed on pressing problems of applied environmental management of global significance. WIMEK needs to formulate and express its USP (unique selling point) with even more clarity and conviction than before. The IAB must then act as a sounding board and critical friend: challenging the ambition of WIMEK’s mission and strategy; questioning the effectiveness of its structure and methods; and helping it set new scientific horizons.

WIMEK is an intermediate organisational structure between the research groups and the central university and the inter-university graduate school SENSE. It thus acts as a cross-cutting section coordinating, facilitating and assuring the quality of research across its participatory groups. The WIMEK self-evaluation report records its commitment to “bottom-up research planning”. The specific resources available to it are modest and operate through essentially horizontal mechanisms:

- WIMEK funded PhDs
- WIMEK funded research fellowships
- WIMEK organised PhD courses and activities

To judge the effectiveness of WIMEK it is important to report and learn from the deployment of these specific mechanisms. It is only through carefully evaluating what these investments have achieved that sound judgements can be made about whether to continue doing more or less of the same. Among the criteria for judging WIMEK's specific mechanisms should be the following:

- contribution to inter-group activity
- contribution to interdisciplinarity
- contribution to the strategic development of WIMEK
- contribution to establishing and promulgating WIMEK's collective identity

The other major asset of WIMEK is the leadership of its Director and managing group. This team needs to assess its own performance, not only against the above criteria, but also in relation to the actions they have taken to

- maintain and improve the quality of WIMEK research and training
- project the vision of WIMEK and its potentialities
- shape the overall composition and structure of WIMEK in keeping with its strategy

The IAB would like to put forward these points as a framework for self-reporting for subsequent meetings. It is meant to promote overall self-reflection rather than an exercise in the analysis of output metrics. It should sit beside an elaboration of new scientific horizons for WIMEK.

Future involvement of IAB into development of both substance and mechanisms of WIMEK

A focus of future IAB involvement is the critical evaluation and the enhancement of linkages between chair groups within WIMEK, and also between WIMEK groups and institutions elsewhere. This can occur through specific suggestions for such linkages, based on content (e.g., between AEW and ESS, for ecosystem modelling), or else through new structural mechanisms that foster such linkages, e.g., through the introduction of new mechanisms for interaction between doctoral students from different chair groups.

Overall, the IAB would like to see the next time,

1. a thorough internal assessment by WIMEK on the points raised in these "general comments", coupled to
2. a discussion paper of how WIMEK in the existing Wageningen setting could be profiled as a role model for interdisciplinary environmental research and establishing itself more strongly as an international beacon in this field.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

AEW – Aquatic Ecology and Water Quality Management Group

General remarks:

Led by one of the best ecological modellers in the world, this group must be considered one of the gems of WIMEK – which has been clearly demonstrated by the earlier assessment and also the self-evaluation (topped by the recent award of the Spinoza prize). From the point of view of WIMEK, it could be desirable to make greater use of the chair group's knowledge in modelling in order to advance the development of models in other chair groups.

Assessment	Year	
	2007	2010
Quality	Excellent	Similar
Productivity	Very good	Similar / improved
Relevance	Excellent	Similar
Viability	Excellent	Similar

Remarks concerning the assessment:

Visibly, the chair group combines a strong interest and high performance in theoretical systems ecology with very practical and stakeholder-relevant aquatic ecology research in water quality issues. Currently, the group seems to be able to integrate the two aspects very well – but this will likely remain a challenge: how to make sure that water quality assessments take into account the theoretical perspective? Despite the physical absence from Wageningen, the group leader was well able to argue for his perspective, by video-link from a conference elsewhere.

Development since the last review:

Besides the Spinoza prize for the chair, also other group members seem to be productive and well recognised in their community. The widely appreciated AquaTerra EU project has been concluded with significant Wageningen contributions.

ENP – Environmental Policy Group

General remarks:

The group continues to be a very strong member of WIMEK. It includes world-leading environmental sociologists renowned for their work on ecological modernisation, environmental governance and sustainable consumption and production across the globe. Having such a strong social science group as an active member contributes greatly to WIMEK's unique interdisciplinary offer in both research and postgraduate training, and opens up untold opportunities for cutting-edge collaborations.

Assessment	Year	
	2007	2010
Quality	Excellent	Similar
Productivity	Very good	Improved
Relevance	Excellent	Similar
Viability	Very good	Similar

Remarks concerning the assessment:

The value of the group is now well recognised by the University, and from this position of relative security, it has extended its internal structural collaborations (in such fields as water and waste management, marine policy, industrial restructuring, natural resource management, etc) not to mention its leading role in the Wageningen School of Social Sciences. With the right encouragement and support, there is considerable scope to expand this sort of cutting-edge, applied, interdisciplinary work and to extend it strategically to embrace other WIMEK groups. The one risk that needs to be borne in mind is that the leadership and staff of this relatively small unit do not get overstretched by their extensive internal and external commitments.

Development since the last review:

The group goes from strength to strength. Its conceptual and analytical work has attracted worldwide prestige. (Of particular note are the honours bestowed on Professor Mol by the International Sociological Association, the American Sociological Association and the Dutch Royal Academy of Sciences). The group has continued to internationalise its research strategy, with strong European, transatlantic, Asian and African research networks. Research funding has increased, especially from more competitive and prestigious sources, and Ph.D. student numbers have consolidated after a period of sharp growth (which should help improve completion rates).

ENR – Environmental Economics and Natural Resources Group

General remarks:

The Group is a well integrated social science member of WIMEK. The Group has a very good reputation for its applied research on the economics of climate change, biodiversity, natural resources, bioenergy and biotechnology.

Assessment	Year	
	2007	2010
Quality	Good	Improved
Productivity	Good	Similar
Relevance	Very good	Similar
Viability	Good	Improved

Remarks concerning the assessment: To increase its scientific impact it has successfully refocused its analytical and publishing efforts to give greater emphasis to advancing its core conceptual and theoretical interests, which include decision analysis, game theory and complex economic/ecological modeling.

Development since the last review:

Its targeting of internationally leading journals is beginning to bear fruit. At the same time it is not neglecting its policy-related and interdisciplinary mission. It is developing its interest in the economics of water management which opens up new opportunities for internal and external research collaboration.

ESA – Environmental Systems Analysis Group

General remarks:

This group plays an integrative role within WIMEK and has been reviewed with extremely good results in the past. The midterm review revealed continued strength and innovative capacity in all important aspects. The IAB hopes that the linkages between ESA research and work being carried out in other components of WIMEK can remain strong or be even further improved.

Assessment	Year	
	2007	2010
Quality	Excellent	Similar
Productivity	Excellent	Similar
Relevance	Excellent	Similar
Viability	Excellent	Similar

Remarks concerning the assessment:

For the ESA group to function both as a unit of itself, with the expectation to play a coordinating role in WIMEK, and to support its leader who is managing research activities on all continents of the planet, represents a major challenge. This is achieved well, due to the consistent focus on a few key areas (ecosystem services, phenology, nitrogen etc.) and the high level of competence of the subgroup leaders. The (part-time?) departure of C. Kroeze to a different position will represent a challenge for the group in terms of finding a suitable replacement.

Development since the last review:

Positive and forward-looking, without major changes.

ESS – Earth System Science & Climate Change Group

General remarks:

ESS is a large unit, covering a broad range of topics from ecohydrological process studies to social science aspects of adaptation. It has been evaluated with high marks in the past and continues to be successful.

Assessment	Year	
	2007	2010
Quality	Very good	Improving
Productivity	Very good	Improving
Relevance	Very good to excellent	Similar
Viability	Very good to excellent	Similar

Remarks concerning the assessment:

This large team presented itself well, despite the understandable absence of its leader (to whom the IAB expresses its heartfelt condolences for the loss of his wife, just around the time of the evaluation). There is an enormous breadth of approaches in the chair group, and high quality work in almost every component. What was less clear and perhaps merits attention of the leadership during the near future is the focus on some few unique selling points – working towards this might allow the leader(s) to engage even better in the work of their staff and thereby improve upon the leading position of the group within its field(s) of research.

Development since the last review:

Growing team, with high level of project funding and international relationships.

ETE – Environmental Technology Group

General remarks:

The group continues working on breakthrough technologies of high quality and visibility. The group interfaces well with the special needs of societies in developed and developing countries.

Assessment	Year	
	2007	2010
Quality	Very good	Similar
Productivity	Excellent	Similar
Relevance	Excellent	Similar
Viability	Very good	Improved

Remarks concerning the assessment:

Productivity and relevance is absolutely beyond doubt. With the new professor on board since a year, the future broad impact on environmental (bio) technology is more than

guaranteed. This group with its strong link into the more fundamental research is probably unique in the world. The group is a pearl and the University must do all to assure for it an optimal environment in the future.

Development since the last review:

With the new leadership in place, this chair group has all odds to become stronger scientifically with the consequent spill-over into the technological impact. This ship goes full steam and has taken into account all remarks from the last review.

HWM – Hydrology and Quantitative Water Management Group

General remarks:

The HWM chair group aims to contribute to the improved understanding of catchment-scale hydrological processes through advanced measurement, modeling and assimilation techniques. The main objectives are (1) developing, testing and interpreting advanced observation methods for hydrological and hydraulic fluxes and states at a range of spatial and temporal scales; (2) developing catchment-scale hydrological models for water flow and sediment transport; (3) hydrological synthesis at the catchment scale, with special attention to hydroclimatological extremes (floods and droughts).

Assessment	Year	
	2007	2010
Quality	Good to very good	Improved
Productivity	Good	Similar
Relevance	Good	Improved
Viability	Very good to excellent	Improved

Remarks concerning the assessment:

The quality of the research and its output has clearly increased. The group is on the right track. Productivity has usually some lag-time before the quality increase is also seen in the publications. The IAB is confident that in one to two years, the number of excellent publications will reflect the stronger quality and relevance. A first indicator is the increase of the PhD students. The research done by this group is highly relevant, and once more of high impact publications are produced, this relevance will become more clearly visible. With the new leadership in place, the viability of the group is beyond doubt. Combined with the (potential) relevance of the research, this group is on the best way to become an absolute international leader.

Development since the last review:

It takes some time to see the quantum leap in quality and output after the change of the leadership. The group has made much effort to incorporate the last review’s comments in its future planes and has set the new course. The IAB is confident that the new course will yield fruit soon.

LAR – Landscape Architecture Group

General remarks:

No previous assessment results available.

Although the Group does include dedicated staff known for their design expertise and individual scholarship, it does not yet have a well established research tradition. In 2008 an Evaluation Committee concluded that most of its staff did not meet the scientific requirement for full participation in a research school. Since then the Group has embarked on an ambitious course to build up an internal research culture and develop a clear research strategy, relating the Group's scientific potential to the requirements of design teaching and practice and to external opportunities for research funding, collaboration and publishing. The achievement of its plans will involve sustained internal commitment and the support and cooperation of other research groups. The Group is still in the early stages of these developments, but under new leadership it is beginning to show real progress, including a number of staff PhDs, the establishment of strategic external research links and collaboration with other WIMEK groups on pressing landscape problems. It seems on course to realising the promise of having a strong research-orientated design group within the WIMEK family.

MAQ – Meteorology and Air Quality Group

General remarks:

MAQ is a dynamic and very successful unit, focusing on core questions in its field, such as urban climate, cloud dynamics and other issues of high relevance for environmental change and therefore for WIMEK.

Assessment	Year	
	2004	2010
Quality	Very good to excellent	Similar
Productivity	Very good	Similar
Relevance	Very good to excellent	Similar
Viability	Very good to excellent	Similar

Remarks concerning the assessment:

This group does high-level and highly specific meteorological research using experimental methods and modelling techniques. From the IAB's perspective (which did not contain particular competence in experimental meteorology), this group is motivated and highly efficient, but somewhat self-contained. It was not obvious in which way it actually related to the goals of WIMEK, and where the opportunities for improved interdisciplinary action would be.

Development since the last review:

No specific remarks beyond what is said above.

MIB – Microbiology – Environmental Research Group

General remarks:

Only part of the research of the Laboratory of Microbiology belongs to WIMEK. That part aims to provide fundamental insight in the biotransformations and interactions of microorganisms and to contribute to their exploitation in environmental applications. The research is primarily molecular-oriented, regularly incorporating genomics approaches, and based on the integration of three microbial disciplines, viz. genetics, ecology, and physiology. There is a strong emphasis on anaerobic Bacteria and Archaea because of their novel and unique properties, their relevance for various application areas, particularly in environmental processes and technology.

Assessment	Year	
	2007	2010
Quality	Excellent	Similar
Productivity	Very good	Improved
Relevance	Very good	Improved
Viability	Good to very good	Improved

Remarks concerning the assessment:

The quality of the group remained excellent. It belongs to the world leading laboratories in the field of anaerobic microbiology. The productivity has clearly increased while maintaining the excellent quality. The research of this chair group is highly relevant, for both industrialized and developing countries. Many of the fundamental findings from this group have found their way into application, particularly in environmental technology. The group is still on track and many new findings are underway to possible applications.

It was not clear to the IAB why in the 2007 assessment this group's viability was critically assessed. The IAB considers the presence of this chair group in two Research Schools as an asset, because it gives the researchers a broader quality assurance and spectrum of interaction. Seen the international stature of the group and its leaders, there is no doubt at all about the viability.

Development since the last review:

The chair group has taken the comments from the previous review very seriously, has reacted positively where necessary, and has indicated its position towards some of the comments. The IAB does agree with the chosen way of the chair group.

SEG – Soil Physics, Ecohydrology and Groundwater Management

General remarks:

The group studies the water-unsaturated zone in soils. The physical processes in this zone heavily influence the exchange of water, energy, gasses, and solutes (chemicals) with other

environmental compartments such as the atmosphere, crops and natural vegetation, and groundwater. These exchanges are studied at different spatial scales, ranging from soil core, via field and geographical region up to river basin level. The group is well integrated in WIMEK's main research foci.

Assessment	Year	
	2007	2010
Quality	Very good	Improved
Productivity	Very good	Similar
Relevance	Very good	Similar
Viability	Very good	Improved

Remarks concerning the assessment:

The chair group has now paved the way for its future. It is consolidated and the transition period has been completed. This transition has clearly increased the quality of the work. The productivity will follow as the first cohort of PhD students will finish and publish their research. The group leader has a long history of high quality publication. This is a guarantee that in the new set-up all group members will be stimulated to reach the quality targets. The research is continuing to be of high relevance. Under the new leadership and the completion of the period of consolidation, the viability of the group is excellent.

Development since the last review:

The transition has been completed, the mile stones are in place, the group can now fully concentrate on its science. In the understanding of the IAB, there is no doubt that the group will succeed with its ambitious goals.

SOQ – Soil Chemistry and Chemical Soil Quality

General remarks:

The group has long standing excellent track record in the mechanisms of interaction between nutrients and contaminants) with reactive soil particles, such as organic matter, clay, iron(hydr)oxide and aluminiumhydroxide. This interaction affects their bioavailability and mobility in the soil. The group also investigates how soil particles interact with each other, affecting so soil structure (formation of soil aggregates). Though the group's research is geared more towards the understanding of the basic physical and chemical processes in soil, it makes important contributions to many topics investigated within WIMEK.

Assessment	Year	
	2007	2010
Quality	Excellent	Similar
Productivity	Very good	Similar
Relevance	Excellent	Similar
Viability	Good to very good	Improved

Remarks concerning the assessment:

The group is highly regarded internationally because of its absolute top-quality work with extremely high relevance. The papers are published in the leading journals and show high impact. The IAB could not see why in the last review this group has been marked lower in its viability. Financing is in place, new PhD students have started their work and the output remains stable at a very high level. Therefore, the IAB has adjusted the viability assessment.

Development since the last review:

There was no major critic in the last review and no suggestions have been given there why the viability was marked relatively low. The group is on track and the IAB is confident that the work will continue at a top level also in the years to come.

WIMEK MIDTERM REVIEW

Programme Site Visit International Advisory Board (IAB)

TUESDAY 8 JUNE 2010			
Time	Activity	Who	Location
< 18.00	Arrival IAB members at Hotel	IAB members	Hotel De Wereld
18.00 – 20.30	Dinner IAB – Rik Leemans	IAB + Rik Leemans + Sjoerd van der Zee	Hotel De Wereld
WEDNESDAY 9 JUNE 2010			
Time	Activity	Who	
09.00 – 09.30	Welcome – explanation on programme site visit – SENSE film	Rik Leemans	Atlas - B 103
09.30 – 10.00	Internal IAB meeting	IAB	Atlas - B 103
	Chair groups meetings		
10.15 – 11.15	MIB – Environmental Microbiology	Zehnder / Brasseur / Leemans	Dreijen; chemistry complex; room 0033, ground floor
10.15 – 11.15	ENP – Environmental Policy	Lowe / Cramer	Leeuwenborch
11.30 – 12.30	HWM – Hydrology and Quantitative Water Management	Brasseur / Leemans / Zehnder	Water & Sediment Dynamics Lab
11.30 – 12.30	ENR – Environmental Economics and Natural Resources	Lowe / Cramer	Leeuwenborch; Room V110M (Mansholtzaal)
12.30 – 13.30	Lunch – internal IAB meeting		Atlas - B 103
	Chair group meetings		
13.30 – 14.30	ETE – Environmental Technology	Zehnder / Lowe	Dreijen; “Blue Room”, Biotechnion, first floor
13.30 – 14.30	MAQ – Meteorology and Air Quality	Brasseur / Leemans / Cramer	Atlas 1
14.45 – 15.45	SEG – Soil Physics, Ecohydrology and Groundwater Management	Brasseur / Leemans / Zehnder	Atlas 3
14.45 – 15.45	ESS – Earth System Science	Cramer / Lowe	Atlas 2
	Chair group meetings		
16.00 – 17.00	AEW – Aquatic Ecology and Water Quality Management	Zehnder / Cramer	Lumen A 025
16.00 – 17.00	LAR – Landscape Architecture	Lowe / Brasseur / Leemans	LUMEN 4
17.15 – 18.15	SOQ – Soil Chemistry and Chemical Soil Quality	Zehnder	Atlas C 201 (lab): (PhD presentations) Atlas D 311 (chair group)
17.15 – 18.15	ESA – Environmental Systems Analysis	Cramer / Lowe	Atlas C 45 – lecture room, hall Atlas
18.30 – 20.30	Dinner IAB – WIMEK Board		Hotel de Wereld

THURSDAY 10 JUNE 2010

Time	Activity	Who	Location	Remarks
09.00 – 10.00	IAB – WIMEK Board meeting		Atlas - A 512	
10.00 – 11.00	IAB – WIMEK PhD council meeting		Atlas - A 512	
11.00 – 12.30	IAB meeting – draft Midterm evaluation report		Atlas - A 512	
12.30 – 13.30	Lunch IAB – WIMEK Board		Atlas - A 512	
13.30 – 15.00	IAB meeting – draft Midterm evaluation report		Atlas - A 512	
15.00 – 16.00	IAB: presentation preliminary conclusions		Atlas 1 + 2	
16.00 – 17.00	Drinks and bites		Hall Atlas	
18.00 – 20.30	Dinner IAB – farewell	???	???	

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