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Appelqvist, Hanne

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ON THE VERY IDEA OF AN INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

By Hanne Appelqvist

Institute for Advanced Study (IAS) is the name of the famous Princeton research institute. Established in 1930, the institute continues to foster curiosity-driven basic research "with no view to its immediate utility or the expectation of meeting predetermined goals". In addition to this concrete reference, the term also refers to those research institutes that follow the model set by the Princeton IAS.

So not any research center counts as an institute for advanced study. To belong to the class of some 150 IASs around the world, the institute must commit to the principles that are constitutive of the very idea. The most important of these principles are bottom-up research and interdisciplinary interaction. These principles are also typically complemented by a particular ethos arising from an understanding of the history of science, an ethos that could be characterized by reference to the Biblical virtues of faith, hope, and love.

FREEDOM TO THINK

The bottom-up principle reflects the ideal of academic freedom. In practice, this means that IASs give their fellows an opportunity to focus on questions that arise from their own self-guided curiosity. In doing so, IASs rely on the faith that, as acknowledged experts, researchers themselves are best positioned to identify the questions worth investigating. There is no need to regulate or control their research from without by pushing them to conform to certain strategic goals or thematic priorities. Rather, when we trust the fellows and give them enough time to focus on their own projects, significant theoretical innovations and discoveries will ultimately be realized.

Abraham Flexner, the founding director of the Princeton IAS, gave a classic defense of the bottom-up principle in his essay "The Usefulness of Useless knowledge". According to him, "the world has always been a sorry and confused sort of place – yet poets and artists and scientists have ignored the factors that would, if attended to, paralyze them" (Flexner 1939, 544). Such an intellectual form of life driven by mere curiosity may, for the superficial eye, seem inefficient, useless, and in need of strategic supervision. Yet, over the course of history, it has had surprisingly useful consequences.

Flexner mentions electricity and the radio as examples of innovations that emerged from curiosity-driven basic research without a pursuit for immediate gain. Flexner's concern about the increasing constraints on academic freedom was related to the materialistic goals of the commercial world, but the argument may be extended to cover more noble instrumental goals as well. Basic research that does not take sustainability into its primary spotlight, may still bring along the missing piece of the puzzle. And while the humanities and social sciences will not generate a vaccine for a pandemic, they may turn out to be indispensable for the implementation of the vaccination program in different communities and cultures or when the public debate calls for an analysis of the justification of societal restrictions needed for the handling of the pandemic.

In short, IASs rely on a "conviction of things not seen" just yet, on assurance of the prospect that the most important innovations, ground-breaking results, and deepest societal impact will eventually emerge if the researchers are not bound by external constraints.

THINKING TOGETHER

The other constitutive principle of IASs is the facilitation of interdisciplinary collaboration. IASs host researchers from different disciplines, representing either all academic fields or just the humanities and social sciences as in the Helsinki Collegium. Here, interdisciplinarity is understood as a more ambitious notion than problem based multidisciplinarity. While multidisciplinary projects typically bring representatives of different fields together to investigate a shared topic, full-fledged

interdisciplinarity aims at the critical reflection of the presuppositions of different fields and even theoretical integration across them.

However, if interdisciplinarity is understood in the ambitious sense, it is reasonable to adopt the attitude of hope rather than firm confidence in its realization and bear in mind the challenges involved in interdisciplinary research. These challenges have also been empirically investigated. The first challenge identified concerns communication. If the goal of an interdisciplinary project is to gain in-depth knowledge, not to mention groundbreaking results, then the researchers from different fields must share a common vocabulary. Granted, sometimes we can come up with shared definitions for concepts, especially if the topic is connected with empirical reality. But the situation is not as straightforward in many key disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, where theoretical frameworks and concepts themselves are the object of investigation. Even researchers representing the same field may have conflicting theoretical commitments, presuppositions, and methodological approaches that do not easily translate into a shared terminology. Such differences are not just mere practical obstacles in the attempt to find the "objective truth of the matter". Rather, research in the humanities and social sciences and the body of knowledge emerging from that research is essentially polyphonic.

The second challenge concerns the time span of academic research. In contrast with the commercial world, where the market value of ideas and innovations fluctuates rapidly and one must react swiftly to external incentives, the best scientific discoveries ripe slowly and age well in virtue of the critical scrutiny of the academic community. Hence, it is not realistic to expect significant results from projects that last only a couple of years. Even five-year interdisciplinary projects typically yield rather conservative results and are more often than not applied science. If one bears in mind the challenges of communication, it is also easy to understand that a multidisciplinary research group does not even want to position itself at the deep end of the debate. After all, the institutions that measure the success of such projects expect to see a steady flow of publications, thereby discouraging the researchers to dwell too deeply on the time-consuming theoretical complexities that may lie underneath.

Yet, for an IAS, the greatest challenge may lie in the fact that heavy emphasis on interdisciplinarity does not necessarily align with the bottom-up principle.

It is not easy to see how the fellows' academic freedom could be respected if interdisciplinarity were understood as requiring strategic guidance of research at the level of themes and topics, say, or conformity with the university's strategic emphases. If we aim at the emergence of new, previously unexplored theoretical territories or theoretical integration, then unconstrained freedom to think and to do so from one's own disciplinary base is indispensable. For one should not forget that especially in the humanities and social sciences the researcher's identity and international reputation are inseparably intertwined with their research themes. Younger scholars struggle to establish a distinctive research profile, while more senior scholars are already known for their theoretical and methodological commitments. Indeed, the very force that motivates academic research is the researchers' personal commitment to the questions that intrigue them and upon which their identity as researchers is built. It is thus neither reasonable nor prudent to expect fellows to abandon their personal starting points.

THE INSTITUTE'S ROLE

This is not to say that it is impossible to alleviate the tension between the two IAS principles. Here the way in which the operations of the institute are organized plays a key role. The first factor to take into consideration is the recruitment of fellows. To be an attractive IAS, the institute must aim at recruiting internationally acknowledged experts and the most promising junior scholars. As the most distinguished researchers can choose where they carry out their research, attracting them requires that the institute's values match those that any researcher holds in high regard, namely, academic freedom and the opportunity to focus on one's work with sufficient resources and time. But at the same time, one should bear in mind the hope for interdisciplinary interaction.

When a group of fellows representing different fields is selected at the same time, it is possible to anticipate points of overlap and mutual interests in their projects that are likely to lead to fertile collaborations. Sometimes such collaborations lead to a critical reflection of one's theoretical assumptions and commitments. Sometimes it is enough that a researcher, who has worked exclusively within the boundaries of her own discipline, learns to appreciate the diversity of research. But for this to happen, the fellowship terms must be long enough to allow for the growth of the kind of trust that academic collaboration presupposes. The research community must be a safe space, where everybody can feel respected as an expert of their own discipline.

The second factor is the day-to-day activities of the institute. These too can be organized in a way that respects the fellows' autonomy while simultaneously providing a fertile base for interdisciplinary discourse. In most IASs, the corner stone of activities is a weekly seminar, where fellows present their work to each other. The conversations that begin at the seminar then continue in the daily interaction between the fellows, leading to collisions of ideas and discoveries of mutual interests that may, in turn, grow into more systematic collaborations. When the research ideas emerge organically from the fellows' bottom-up initiatives, such projects also carry beyond their fellowship terms.

The most important resource and reputation factor for any IAS, just as for any university, is the researchers themselves. And it is a mistake to think of a community of researchers as a supercomputer that can be programmed to serve a particular externally determined end or purpose. It rather resembles a living organism which we can see as purposive in it functions, despite the fact that we cannot yet foresee the realization of all possible purposes it may ultimately serve. This is why the leadership of an IAS should adopt the attitude of a gardener rather than that of an IT programmer: to accept the self-governed character and unexpectedness of the growth of ideas and protect that growth from frost and stormy winds.

If the IAS concept relies on the faith that the fellows' curiosity-driven bottom-up research will ultimately result in the best possible outcome and on the hope that the long-term interaction between different fields will sometimes lead to new theoretical and methodological insights, then what is the object or our love? One could say that this object is captured by the stated values of the University of Helsinki, namely, truth, freedom, communality, and learning (*Bildung*). Disinterested search for truth as the starting point of research, recognition of the researcher's freedom as the necessary condition for that search, and a sense of collegiality and solidarity between fellows are values that all lie at the core of the IAS concept. These values are pursued for no other reason than for the sake of learning itself.