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Die Junge Akademie – Working Group "The Two Cultures", Workshop Report Amsterdam 2019

<u>Workshop: Places of (Inter-)Disciplinarity – 4-5 July, NIAS Amsterdam</u>

In the contemporary academic world, the call for more interdisciplinary research is a ubiquitous phenomenon. Interdisciplinarity is considered a key catalyst for innovation and top-level research and is consequently hailed by political and business leaders and scholars alike. Since they are not bound to any individual disciplines, Institutes of Advanced Studies (IAS) might be considered the perfect places for interdisciplinary dialogue at the highest level. Their ideal of free, independent, exploratory research, facilitated by hosting researchers without an expectation of immediately applicable research outcomes, paradoxically seems to make them particularly successful in nourishing scientific innovation. Yet what is it that makes intense and productive exchanges between different disciplines possible in such places? How can unpredictable innovations be facilitated, that is, planned for? How should an IAS be structurally, architecturally, and spatially conceived to offer ideal conditions for interdisciplinary research?

On 4 and 5 July 2019, the *Junge Akademie*'s working group "Two Cultures" met for a workshop in the (highly appropriate) spaces of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS) in Amsterdam. The workshop, part of the working group's ongoing exploration of issues surrounding interdisciplinarity, was organized by Fabian Krämer and Sebastian Matzner. Its concrete objective was to reflect on the Institute of Advanced Study as a format in the global research landscape from the particular perspective of early career researchers with a view to developing these reflection into for a current discussions about the best way forward for IAS institutions in Germany (see below for further details).

The workshop's first day was dedicated to the interplay between architecture and space in universities and research institutes on the one hand and the organization of research along – or across – disciplinary boundaries from both the historical and contemporary viewpoint. Day Two saw the discussion shift to the ideal design for an IAS, informed by two presentations from Sebastian Matzner and NIAS Director Jan Willem Duyvendak.

Fabian Krämer *(NIAS, LMU Munich)* opened the round of presentations with a historical analysis of how universities began becoming two-cultured places in spatial terms as early as the 19th century. Krämer demonstrated how the "academic geography" of the university campus both established and reflected a separation between the sciences and humanities in various historical academic contexts, such as in Germany and the US, in the 19th century.

Niki Vermeulen *(University of Edinburgh, Center for Science and Technology Studies at Leiden University)* examined recently built spaces for the life sciences to study how contemporary academic architecture seeks to promote collaboration among individual sciences and to counteract trends such as overspecialization. Her case studies revealed how time and again the symbolic vocabulary that architects often turn to – e.g. 'bridges' integrated into buildings to both symbolize and facilitate links among individual disciplines – are mostly just superficial gestures that do not prove helpful in practice.

Christian Stein *(Humboldt University Berlin)* stressed that the starting problem for researchers was that interdisciplinarity often represented more of a burden than a boon, since it forced them commit to additional work with other academics in the search for a common objective. Stein also pointed out that individual researchers often know far less than they think they do about how scholars in other fields actually work. With the help of the ID+ method that he introduced, Stein argued, interdisciplinarity can be modelled and choreographed with a view to its protagonists, themes, financing, institutions, and methods, as well as academic biographies, workplaces, and temporal structures such as joint deadlines. This method places the complementary abilities of the individual participants at its centre, not their attachment to this or that discipline.

Sjang ten Hagen *(University of Amsterdam)* examined the question of spatial conditions for interdisciplinarity from the perspective of contemporary university architecture. He focused on reoccurring architectural motifs, such as criteria of identity, diversity, and circulation, as well as core terminology such as "openness" and "transparency". He pointed out that one critical problem is the fact that architects' intentions often have little in common with their structures' later concrete uses. For example, architects have often placed much emphasis on atrium-like buildings as a way of simplifying encounters and openness, even though no positive effect from this kind of construction has actually been demonstrated. Architects can also be criticized for rarely returning to their structures upon completion to retrospectively assess how they are actually used in order to learn and improve techniques for future buildings.

On the following day, **Sebastian Matzner** *(King's College London)* reported on the state of discussion in the Commission for "Developmental Perspectives of Institutes for Advanced Studies in Germany" of the German Council for Science and the Humanities ("Wissenschaftsrat"), in which he serves as an external expert. His presentation on the emerging pitfalls and paradoxes of the format of the Institute of Advance Study in theory and practice informed and widened the group's discussion and provided important impulses for the subsequent conversation with Jan Willem Duyvendak.

Jan Willem Duyvendak *(NIAS Director)* described current challenges and developments of IAS globally. In addition to statistical information and financing issues he described the advantages of IAS for interdisciplinarity compared to universities. While the latter promote interdisciplinarity as a way of attracting external funding, IAS spawn interdisciplinarity through their very nature, Duyvendak said. He pointed out that, as places of collective learning, IAS are ideal for reflecting on methodologies, as well as giving scholars space and time to pursue their own activities, because confrontation with other disciplines reveals the limitations of one's own discipline-shaped perspective.

The ensuing discussion shed light especially on the conflict between the ideal of interdisciplinarity and actual conditions at IAS. Participants considered to what degree physical presence at a particular IAS matters for researchers. A consensus emerged that there was some need for ensuring that IAS applicants be willing to commit from the outset to engage in reciprocal exchange, rather than regarding the IAS merely as a retreat where they can write undisturbed.

The ideal of free research proved especially conflict-ridden. The group discussed to what extent expectations could be placed on IAS fellows without problematically compromising their freedom.

This is, of course, a wider systemic issue: if researchers continue to be evaluated through publication rates, impact factors, and successful grant proposals, then the freedom of research remains deeply affected even for researchers who win the privilege of temporarily working at an IAS. At the same time, while free and interdisciplinary research remains fundamentally significant for academic production, even such work, it seems, must always remain under some form of final evaluation, lest it become (or become regarded) regarded as a self-involved, detached luxury.

A further point of discussion concerned the presence of journalists, poets and writers at IAS. Integrating such participants productively into the academic orientation of IAS remains a challenge. The group also discussed concrete suggestions for improving IAS. Anonymizing the processes for selecting fellows, for instance, by focusing on 'atypical' criteria (e.g. critical discussion of a submitted piece of work, rather than on account of one's career status and established name) could improve diversity at IAS. Both discussion points lead back to the fundamental issue of what kind of applicants and prospective fellows IAS actually want to reach.

Against the backdrop of a rich and productive discussion, the group decided to continue the conversation and meet again with the goal of producing a joint discussion paper on the subject of the problems and potential of IAS from an early career perspective. To this end, the Two Cultures working group will reconvene in November 2019 for a follow-up event at the Historisches Kolleg in Munich.