

# INSTITUTES OF ADVANCED STUDY – OPPORTUNITIES AND PROBLEMS FOR EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS

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## Contents

- 1 Preamble**
  - 3 The challenges of the ECR phase and the potential of the IASs**
  - 4 Limits and risks of traditional on-site IAS fellowships for ECRs**
  - 7 The issue of structural feedback effects of IASs in the academic system**
  - 9 Non-academic fellows at IASs**
  - 10 Proposals and ideas for responsible IASs in the academic system**
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Debate contribution by the *Junge Akademie's* Research Group  
The Two Cultures

The Research Group „The Two Cultures of Science“ is dealing with a basic assumption about science in the modern age that it is divided into „two cultures“: the humanities and the natural sciences. It is dedicated to their history and present and thus contributes to a differentiated view on interdisciplinarity.

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## **i. Preamble**

The German Council of Science and Humanities has committed itself to examining the currently confusing landscape of Institutes of Advanced Study (IASs)<sup>1</sup> and their structures and functions for the academic system and to formulating recommendations for the advancement of IASs in the fabric of academic institutions in Germany. This should reflect the perspective of “young researchers” – referred to hereinafter as early career researchers (ECRs).<sup>2</sup> This paper aims to contribute to this debate by describing the needs and the often conflict-ridden situations ECRs find themselves in and uses this as a basis to develop proposals for concrete measures for the future direction and working methods of IASs.

On account of the systemic significance of IASs, a discussion of ECRs at IASs goes hand in hand with a critique of the university system as a whole. The proposals in this paper are ultimately aimed at improving a system generally in need of reform. In addition, this paper primarily refers to the situation of ECRs in social sciences and humanities, as they are the main groups which take advantage of the opportunities offered by IASs. Natural scientists can often only make limited use of IAS offers for reasons specific to their disciplines.

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**1** In this paper, the term “Institutes of Advanced Study” (IASs) includes University-Based Institutes of Advanced Study (UBIASs), other research centres, Centres for Advanced Study (CASs) and comparable institutions.

**2** In German, the term *wissenschaftlicher Nachwuchs* can be extremely broadly interpreted and includes all the stages of an academic career, from working on a doctorate to being awarded a first permanent professorship. The fact that even experienced postdocs aged 30 or even 40 are considered as *Nachwuchs*, although they already have an independent research profile and management experience, is the subject of critical discussions not only within *Die Junge Akademie*, but within the entire academic community in Germany. This problem is also due to a shortcoming of the German language: To speak of “young” researchers – as it is included in the title of *Die Junge Akademie* (The Young Academy) – is just as problematic, as it is really a question of one’s relative academic age rather than one’s biological age. The English term early career researcher (ECR) circumvents many such terminological problems and has thus been used in both the German and English versions of this paper, despite the name of the institution. In any case, we consider it important to take steps towards establishing a more differentiated understanding of the different stages of an academic career.

In social sciences and humanities in particular, the early career phase is exceptionally long in the German system and includes manifold and often non-formalised qualification requirements. We consider this a major problem of the German academic system (see 2. The challenges of the ECR phase and the potential of the IASs). Furthermore, this career phase coincides with other existential challenges, precipitated by precarious conditions of employment, concurrent career development of spouses and starting a family, which also often occur in this stage of life.

The resulting diversity of needs, which we present in greater detail below, are met with a diversity of different interpretations of the format of IASs. On the whole, we find this very positive; however in our opinion, these need to be designated with greater transparency and organised with clearer intent.

This paper is the result of two workshops conducted by *Die Junge Akademie's* "The Two Cultures" research group. We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences in Amsterdam and the *Historisches Kolleg* in Munich for hosting the two workshops.

## **2. The challenges of the ECR phase and the potential of the IASs**

The initial situation outlined in the preamble gives rise to specific challenges for and expectations and needs of ECRs. Even fulfilling the formal qualification requirements for academic tenure, namely the habilitation, which remains mandatory in many subjects and in particular in the humanities, place high demands on ECRs. Not only is it difficult to meet these requirements from traditional qualification positions (assistant professor, research associate), but also from alternative qualification paths (research group leader, junior professorship). In addition to increasing teaching loads, administrative tasks and involvement in securing third-party funds (both internal and external), which infringe on the time available for the qualification thesis, other career-related experiences come into play which are necessary for future tenure.

In light of the demands placed on emerging researchers to find the time required to work on their qualification theses as well as to meet the informal requirements, which act as de facto qualifications, the focus turns to IASs. A period of residence at an IAS offers an ECR additional time for:

- the habilitation,
- other publications,
- lectures and participation at conferences,
- acquisition of third-party funds.

A period of residence at an IAS also enables up-and-coming researchers to take part in small-scale, national and international networking with other ECRs and particularly with established researchers through the infrastructure and prestige of the institution. Furthermore, depending on the profile of the IAS, a residence can open up opportunities to gain experience in interdisciplinary exchange and public communication of research.

As a result, just as for established researchers, a period of residence at an IAS is highly attractive for ECRs and we are pleased that IASs are becoming increasingly open to ECRs. However, this path only offers temporary relief from specific issues, while the underlying, systemic problems persist (see 4. The issue of structural feedback effects of IASs in the academic system).

### 3. Limits and risks of traditional on-site IAS fellowships for ECRs

The unique feature of the ideal-type IAS, namely releasing researchers from their everyday obligations, is a valuable asset: They can continue their research uninterrupted and, depending on the profile of the IAS, interdisciplinary dialogue is promoted. In the ECR stage of an academic career, this often clashes with other aspirations and prospects. This relates to academic obligations as well as the general challenges of life outside of academia. While established researchers also struggle with many of these challenges, they are existential issues for ECRs.

The following three areas of conflict have the potential to be especially problematic:

#### *a) The tension between discipline and interdisciplinarity*

For many ECRs, it is essential to become qualified in a particular discipline. Positioning, visibility and networking within a specific discipline remain vital for the possibility of being offered a permanent academic position, as such positions are almost exclusively linked to the representation of a specific discipline. At the same time, there is an intellectual aspiration and the increasing institutional expectation to participate in interdisciplinary work. While interdisciplinarity is gaining importance in terms of promoting science, conducting research and furthering career development, institutional structures remain strongly influenced by structures linked to a specific discipline. For ECRs who have to orient themselves towards these structures to achieve a permanent position, publishing research in relevant, discipline-specific publication series and branches in academic publishing houses and/or relevant journals is crucial and has an influence on research projects from the very outset. In contrast, participation in interdisciplinary projects, where it is difficult to make clear the contributions made by several separate disciplines, are rarely recognised and rewarded. As a result, particularly intensive, innovative and promising forms of interdisciplinary research can be extremely risky for the career prospects of ECRs. This is true when different disciplines are brought together to solve a problem (instrumental interdisciplinarity) or when the concurrence of different disciplines serves to raise awareness for their own work (epistemological-critical interdisciplinarity), but it is even more emphasised when asking interdisciplinary questions with an unbiased openness and approaching these questions with innovative methods (creative-generative interdisciplinarity). The “temporary dissolution” of the conventions of their own discipline – though in itself desirable and advantageous – therefore does not come without its problems from the perspective of ECRs.

***b) Developing a profile and gaining visibility at the home institution***

Especially during the qualification phase and in the context of the first permanent position, it is often important for ECRs to be on-site at their home institutions to carry out foundational local networking and groundwork for their own academic work. This ranges from setting up their own research groups or actively participating in academic committees in order to raise their profiles at the institution, to organising focused intra- and interuniversity collaborations. The “temporary dissolution” and longer-term absence through an interim period at an IAS can disrupt such activities and come into conflict with the maintenance of important processes, which also boost the profile and secure the status of ECRs.

***c) Age-specific life circumstances of ECRs***

As mentioned in the preamble, for many researchers, the decisive career step of the ECR phase is at the same time a stage of life characterised by crucial non-academic decisions and changes. Such changes limit the mobility, time available for academic tasks, and scope of ECRs, such that a temporary residence at an IAS, which is not affiliated with the home institution, can be made impossible. These include:

- entering into a committed relationship, where the partner often has ties to a specific location or seeks to meet the mobility demands of their own career;
- starting a family which necessitates arrangements for childcare, for balancing work and family life, as well as for child-oriented integration in social environments;
- caring for family members, which is only possible on location;
- social inclusion at one’s local residence, for example through social or political involvement.

If IASs pay insufficient attention to these lived realities or fail to do so at all, they run the risk of inadvertently perpetuating and consolidating exclusionary structures in the academic system. In reality, the possibility of participating in the opportunities offered by IAS is therefore limited to persons who are unaffected, or only affected to a lesser extent, by the aspects listed above. Access to the resources available at IASs gives these persons a strategic edge in the academic competition for the few permanent positions over those who are excluded from participating in such opportunities, offered by IAS solely on account of their life circumstances (and not their expertise as researchers!).

These effects can be abated by improving local infrastructure (including family-friendly housing for fellows, maintaining contacts at local childcare facilities and schools) and by improving the financial resources for fellowships (reimbursement of travel and other costs which arise for partners as well). However, even impro-

ved local infrastructure for fellows, in an attempt to reconcile professional and family life, reaches its limits if researchers have strong ties to a particular place for any number of reasons. In addition to the reasons already listed (establishment of research groups, obligations to the home institution, family connections, political/societal involvement), discipline-specific prerequisites such as dependency on discipline-specific infrastructure (for example laboratories for experimental research) or geographic-economic difficulties (as is often the case when integrating researchers from the global south) also have to be borne in mind.

Not all tensions can be resolved, and there are good reasons why IASs abide by their original idea of bringing fellows together in a certain place only for a limited period of time. But it is important to be aware of these tensions. In order to actually overcome the factors limiting the potential for inclusion in existing IAS structures, it would be wise to rethink and, where appropriate, to adapt the implementation of the obligation to reside in the location of the respective IAS. Opportunities to negotiate the length and continuity of fellowships or to trial alternative forms of participation, beyond on-site involvement, could make a significant contribution towards orienting IAS offers for broader target groups and therefore, to the diversification of research. Of course, in specific cases, all of these instruments must be carefully weighed against the benefits of the on-site working model.

#### **4. The issue of structural feedback effects of IASs in the academic system**

IASs can temporarily solve the acute problems of time and resource shortages in the general university academic system for individual fellows and provide valuable stimuli for research. At the same time, however, IASs are an important part of the academic system as a whole and as such have the potential – as well as through their increasing prevalence – to compound and exacerbate precisely those problems which make IASs attractive places for certain researchers. Against the backdrop of these adverse effects, ECRs are disproportionately affected by the following two core problems.

- Time available for research: Due to increased teaching commitments and administrative tasks, researchers become increasingly dependent on “hiatuses”, such as those offered by IASs, in order to pursue or complete their own research work. We regard it as problematic that the union of research and teaching is increasingly being undermined by the need to crowd research work out of everyday university life. One particularly grave factor here is the exodus from teaching. The common and nearly uninterrupted absence of leading researchers (for example, through a string of IAS residences) means teaching obligations are increasingly taken over by ECRs. From our perspective, the key difficulty lies in the fact that the opportunities which exempt certain researchers from teaching obligations and administrative tasks through IAS residences exert more pressure on those “left behind” by making even greater demands on their time. This increases the risk of two tiers emerging in academia, in which research is increasingly only possible within the framework of IASs and ever more difficult in everyday academic life.
- Financing and the effects of decreased job security: In addition to time pressures, the IAS structure is often linked to financial pressures, which affect ECRs disproportionately. Due to the international influence of IASs and fellows’ mobility, more attention should be paid to which (often unintended) consequences certain IAS fellowship financing models can have for the fellows’ home institutions. Financing models which require the home institution to continue paying a salary and in which a period of residence is enabled by a buy-out, where the IAS offers compensation/allocates funds to the home institution, often mean that ECRs in phases of growth, during which they have no contractual ties to institutions are then excluded from participation – even though securing a fellowship can be the deciding factor in continuing to pursue or leaving academia in such precarious situations. Just as significant is the fact that the funds allocated to a fellow’s home institution by the IAS in various financing models rarely represent compensation in full. Teaching substitutes are then offered lower pay and frequently very short-term employment contracts, eit-

her because there is factually less money available or because institutions try to skim money off their teaching budgets to generate revenue. In addition to further financial disadvantage, this kind of employment leads to decreased job security for ECRs, particularly in the UK and the US (adjunct positions, temporary teaching fellows).

From our point of view, reflections on future perspectives for IASs must take into account the tension between the (individual) desired length and frequency of residences at IASs on the one hand, and the relative strength of systemic feedback effects on the other hand. IASs that also want to show consideration for ECRs should therefore also take into account which consequences they create for ECRs who do not benefit from IAS fellowships. We believe that responsible funding for top research and top researchers should not be based on the price of a further deterioration of working conditions for those who, regardless of their scholarly excellence, have little or no access to the further privileges associated with such funding.

## **5. Non-academic fellows at IASs**

Reflections on the scope and openness of IASs to previously overlooked ECRs can be extended to the integration of non-academics in IASs. The rewards of interdisciplinary collaboration can not only be reaped from exclusive groups of researchers, but particularly through the inclusion of persons from non-academic fields. For this reason, we welcome the increasing endeavours to incorporate this into the work of IASs – with regard to both academic thinking as well as increased social participation from academic institutions.

Nonetheless, we observe a tension between aspirations and reality: Objectives such as the disruption of academic ways of thinking and engaging in dialogue on equal terms are often formulated or implied, but at the same time, there is frequently a failure to clarify the status of the non-academic fellows. This becomes apparent, for example, in rather unfortunate collaborations between researchers and artists, where the artists (unwillingly) take on an inferior function as aesthetic decoration or fulfil the role of a poorly integrated accessory to the academic main act. Even the idea of using artists to communicate research results or – even more questionable – as catalysts for successful research communication fails to do justice to the idea of a truly interdisciplinary collaboration. As a consequence, often neither the researchers involved nor the artists derive any lasting benefit from the result.

We are thus advocating appreciation for other ways of thinking and for working beyond academic concerns as the basis for fruitful collaboration between researchers and non-academics. It must be clear what the two parties can offer and expect from one another. This implies addressing problems such as ostensible equality and discussing the academisation of art as well as the related mechanisms for institutionalisation and the preservation of individual fields' rank among themselves.

In addition, interdisciplinary dialogue should not be limited to artists as the only group of non-academics. We would also like to encourage the consideration of a broader definition of non-academic fellows. This could range from creative professionals and journalists to representatives from skilled trades, economy and social institutions, among others. This kind of integration of non-academic fellows can prompt a change in perspective, critical dialogue and unpredictable ideas and thereby lead to interdisciplinary knowledge gains.

## 6. Proposals and ideas for responsible IASs in the academic system

IASs can be extremely beneficial for the funded researchers as well as for the academic system as a whole. This paper has focused on what we regard as problematic developments and, in part, on complex tensions from the perspective of ECRs with regard to IASs. To this end, we conclude by presenting some proposals for bringing to bear the strengths of IASs for all researchers, science and society.

At the core (and in light of the feedback effects listed in section 4), we would like to witness a strong awareness from IASs of their responsibility for the wider ecosystem of general academic life at universities. Thinking about future perspectives for IAS in Germany should not be limited to efforts to create the ideal conditions for selected fellows based at the institutes, but should always keep the academic system as a whole and all status groups in view. For the sustainability of the IAS structure, we consider it crucial that IASs grapple more intensively and explicitly with the question of how they can responsibly and repeatedly enable a “temporary untangling”, so that certain groups are not de facto excluded from participating in the opportunities offered by IASs and so that it is not at the expense of fellows’ home institutions (particularly the ECRs there) (see section 3. Limits and risks of traditional on-site IAS fellowships for ECRs).

In addition to a shift in thinking in this respect, we would like to present the following possibilities for improving IASs:

### ***a) Preserving diversity while improving communication***

Considering the diversity of needs of ECRs, we regard the diversity of IASs as one of the strengths of the German academic system which should be maintained. To ensure that this strength can be fully brought to bear, it is necessary, however, that IASs can communicate their profile clearly and widely, ideally in an international setting.

There is considerable variation among IASs, for example with regard to

1. the provision for fellowships and whether there are opportunities to negotiate this provision;
2. whether their focus is disciplinary or interdisciplinary;
3. what expectations they have of fellows;
4. whether they engage the fellows of current cohorts – i. e. to organise workshops, to play an active role in outreach events, to develop new projects – or if they concentrate the fellows – i. e. primarily offer space for fellows to concentrate on their research.

The individual needs of ECRs also vary widely depending on factors such as the stage of their career, phase of their research, or vocational, familial and social circumstances. The clearer and better the profile of IASs is communicated, the greater the likelihood that ECRs will be able to find the institution which best suits their specific needs. In light of the steadily increasing numbers of (UB)IASs in Germany alone, we also suggest providing a Germany-wide overview for such fellowship programmes. The EU-wide EURIAS programme, which is suspended for two years, can provide some interesting suggestions.

***b) Adapting the selection process for academic fellows***

- In the case of consistent selection processes for fellows from different career stages, we consider it desirable – in the interests of fostering excellence while improving the ECRs’ chances – to strengthen project-related aspects of the selection procedure, or even to initiate a “blind” selection process exclusively on the basis of submitted projects.
- If curricula vitae are considered as part of the selection process, applicants with non-linear career paths should not be disadvantaged. Equally, applicants who have progressed through the stages of their career at a slower pace on account of varying biographical reasons should not be deferred on this basis. In view of this, we suggest requesting in the invitation to tender that periods of care for children or elderly relatives be indicated in CVs and that it be demonstrated there how these will be considered in the selection process. In order to help compensate for the systemic feedback effects described in section 4, involvement in teaching and/or in academic self-administration should also be included expressly as relevant positive criteria in applicant assessment and selection. Applicants should be invited to recommend themselves in this respect as well.
- Conversely, we consider it helpful to request that applicants state how often they have already benefitted from comparable fellowship programmes. The relative frequency or rarity of previous periods of residence at an IAS can and should be taken into consideration by selection panels to prevent a disproportionate concentration of the privileges of an IAS residence among certain individuals (and their continued absence from their home institutions).
- In general, we consider it necessary to clearly state selection criteria and also advocate disclosure of the members of the selection panel.
- In our opinion, when recruiting a selection panel, the limitation of the duration of membership on a selection panel and the consideration of the frequency that comparable roles have been held at other institutions are essential for avoiding a concentration of decision-making power among few decision-makers.

***c) Adapting the selection process and integrating non-academic fellows***

We believe the integration of persons working in non-academic fields holds great potential. Based on our own experiences in Die Junge Akademie with the benefits and difficulties in this field (see section 5. Non-academic fellows at Institutes of Advanced Study), we propose the following adaptations which could help to improve the productivity of such collaborations:

- We are aware that generally fewer non-academic fellowships are awarded than research fellowships. Nonetheless, we would like to encourage diversity in these fellowships and the inclusion of outstanding and/or innovative “practitioners” in addition to artists – from skilled tradespersons to activists (creative professionals in the widest sense). One potential approach to the selection process would be to include changing specifications in the invitations to tender.
- We consider it sensible to separate invitations to tender and the selection processes for researchers and non-academic guests at IASs. Only then can an IAS precisely define its expectations from non-academic fellows, which qualifications they should bring to the table and what should be achieved within the framework of the fellowship.
- As with the academic fellows, junior and senior levels should also be borne in mind, as the aspirations and expectations for a residence in a non-academic field may be demonstrated in various ways by individuals in different stages of their careers.
- An individual grant in the form of a prize, for example, would be an interesting option for non-academic senior fellows. One possible aim of this could be to attract outstanding individuals in their field to an institute for a shorter time without attachment to a specific project. The prize winners would be external, high-profile initiators who would enter into the dialogue as experts and provide a new kind of publicity. This could lead to greater prestige and attention for everyone involved. The aim is to provide inspiration on equal terms instead of a coexistence distorted by hierarchies. One selection criterion could be the ability to find commonalities with aspects of the work of academic fellows, who remain at an institute for lengthier terms. We therefore consider the medium of awarding a prize to be appropriate, as it is most fitting with the career stage of non-academic senior fellows and enables the fellowships to be applied for and awarded on the basis of a proposal. In doing so, it practises a “promotion of (artistic/practical) excellence”. The existing junior fellow level can serve to counter any criticism that this approach is merely a front to give the appearance of deeper interdisciplinarity and/or networking.
- For non-academic junior fellowships, we perceive another situation which resembles the specific challenges faced by ECRs in certain aspects. The more precarious living conditions of artists and practitioners trying to establish themselves must be taken into account here as well as the need to create

spaces for creative freedom, which also ensure they can make a living. For this reason, we make the case for direct application processes and longer scholarship periods. Non-academic junior fellows could use projects to make connections which support them in the continued establishment of their positions. The infrastructure/platform offered at IAS serves both as a network and a forum for thematic exchange. The selection of junior fellows can take place independently of the academic fellows, but the scope in which interested parties can apply should be limited by a clear invitation to tender, for example by expressing the expectation of a firm interest in interaction with researchers. The intellectual exchange as well as the rise in prestige through affiliation with an IAS can be seen as non-material support in a formative career phase.

- Both of the proposed fellowships should ideally be selected by an interdisciplinary panel which could be comprised of former prize winners/fellows and representatives from the supporting institution, local cultural offices or the artistic direction of local cultural institutions. We make the case for regular change with a certain continuity, for example a three-year commission with a staggered rotation. In addition, we would welcome the offering of junior fellowships on the basis of the relevant profiles of the various IASs – that is, on the basis of their concrete perspectives for non-academics.

***d) Making societal connections through infrastructure and networking***

We welcome the efforts of numerous IASs to increasingly open themselves up to the local and national public and to foster dialogue between academia, society and culture. In their so doing, we consider it important for them to engage in a genuine dialogue, where public space is not accessed (or occupied) exclusively by academics with their specific expertise, as members of the public should also enjoy the potential to actively engage in the dialogue and opportunities to work together with researchers. This is the only way that a mutually stimulating exchange can take place. However, this requires a local presence, networks, time and expertise which can hardly be mustered by researchers during a short period of residence at an IAS. For this reason, we find it important to establish IAS engagement facilitators with the relevant contacts and local expertise. The role of such facilitators requires a lengthy residence on-site and considerable scholarly or scientific expertise. However, this role enables both sides to initiate contact with each other – not only from IASs/IAS fellows to local partners, but also local partners to IASs/IAS fellows – provided that facilitators are able to maintain cooperation relationships in the long term and pass information about cohorts of fellows on to the relevant partners promptly. In addition, such facilitators as well as IAS management and fellows themselves would ideally not limit their social engagement to the urban milieu where the vast majority of IASs are based, but pointedly seek to have an impact in rural areas of the region in an attempt to avoid narrowing the presence (and acceptance) of research to urban contexts, which can be to the detriment of more rural contexts.

**Postscript:** This paper does not lay down the position or a resolution of *Die Junge Akademie*, but is a contribution to the debate formulated by the authors and supported by “The Two Cultures” research group.

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## Die Junge Akademie

at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy  
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German National Academy of Sciences  
Leopoldina

*Die Junge Akademie* is the first academy of young academics worldwide; offering prominent young scientists and artists, from German speaking backgrounds, interdisciplinary and socially relevant space for academic collaboration. The academy was founded in 2000 as a collaborative project of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities and the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina. Since then, *Die Junge Akademie* has developed into a model organization and inspiration for similar initiatives worldwide.

