

Fostering interactions

The Spring of 2016 at IIAS has been marked by the unusual conjunction and demands of developing three major grant proposals. Two of them seek to contribute, in different ways, to the renewal of urban studies by further contextualising its practice, and by engaging more with the local human ecologies. The third proposal, more ambitious, seeks to set in motion a connected humanities platform aimed at fostering new research and educational opportunities, built on an inclusive international and trans-regional network of scholars and social cultural actors.

Philippe Peycam

THESE APPLICATIONS, IF SUCCESSFUL, will determine many of our activities for the next four years. The process of application writing, not unusual in the life of an institute, is an important exercise because it forces us to reflect on what we have been doing, what is worth pursuing and strengthening, and more generally, to see where the institute is heading in terms of a broader direction and vision.

All three initiatives share one major inflection: the effort on our part to devolve activities and agendas. This means not only that IIAS-earmarked events take place in Asia (and sometimes Africa, Europe and America) with local partners, but also that research agendas themselves, and their subsequent developments, may now also emerge locally. The proposals have been written through a bottom-up process, in which knowledge is framed by a multiplicity of socially and culturally 'experienced' practices. This effort of further decentralising research means that traditional Western 'area studies' researchers may not always be the exclusive mediators determining terms and

agendas of area-based projects. The involvement of these specialised scholars will, however, be essential for culturally 'translating' research outcomes and for providing them with new significance beyond their places of origin.

The three envisaged programmes will indeed be insistent on locating regionally framed phenomena in their multiplicity of connections and on seeking their potential universal significance, mainly through comparative analyses. IIAS is ideally positioned to serve as a trans-regional facilitating platform for activities that, if grounded locally, have connections, ramifications and significances regionally and throughout the world.

Another feature of these projects in the making is that their research schemes, in both their development and expected outcomes, hold the potential to generate transformations in education development, network building and local capacity building. The three programmes contain provisions for participants to engage with multi-sector actors, and by extension, to contribute to local developments. Ultimately, the objective is to support academic institutions by fostering new methodological and pedagogical models.

Reaching out to other sectors means to widen the scope of the programs' social impact while engaging a broader constituency of stakeholders beyond

the traditional community of scholars, students and other educators, who, taken separately, are always vulnerable to changes determined 'from above'.

This effort of a decentralised, connected, trans-sector knowledge-making process must be considered against a context, in which not just 'regional studies' but humanistic knowledge in general is under threat due to the corporatisation of higher education. The recent decision of the Japanese government, for example, to close down social science and humanities programs is a case in point. The current dismantling of regional studies at the Australian National University is another one. These developments reflect a growing gap in aspirations and views between those governing and those who are governed in many societies in Asia, Europe and elsewhere. Humanistic intellectual pursuits that seek meaning through comparisons, connections and correlations give sustenance for multi-vocal realities of the world they represent. They often find themselves in contradiction with the prevalent discourse of socio-economic 'relevance'.

The critical question remains: what is the significance and implication of a research-led initiative, not just in terms of conveying new meaning, but also in its potential to instil change (by way of questioning and challenging)? We don't know yet how far the programmes for which we hope to receive support will help us to push our agenda of fostering genuine transcultural interactions with and within Asia. What I am sure of, however, is that in the process of developing them, we have experienced first-hand a desire for new approaches beyond traditionally delineated methods. In the deepening of inter-personal ties with colleagues and friends, from all walks of life, we have caught glimpses of what an enduring collaborative network can do to push the frontiers of knowledge production. This is a unique gift, made possible by IIAS and its global inter-connectedness.

Philippe Peycam, Director IIAS



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