# Mapping the world of UBIAS

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When first considering organizing a global meeting of University-Based Institutes for Advanced Study (UBIAS) in the summer of 2009, we started out with an internet search and were surprised to find so many institutes of this kind worldwide.

Previously, we had been in touch with several widely renowned IAS that are not university-based, like the famous IAS Princeton, looking at them as models for setting up an institute like ours. We did indeed travel to Princeton and visited other famous institutes like the National Humanities Center, the institutes in Palo Alto, Uppsala, Wassenaar and the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, receiving a very warm welcome and the most generous hospitality and advice at all these wonderful places. We learnt a tremendous amount through these encounters, getting to understand the basics and essentials that make them work, with components ranging from the vital necessity of rigorous academic standards and selection procedures to the importance of community-building, cultural activities and more practical matters such as regular meals shared by all fellows of the institute. So we have every reason to be grateful to these outstanding institutions and to revere them as highly attractive models. They have set the standards, and the excellent public reputation enjoyed by the term "IAS" today is due to their pioneering work and efforts.

And yet, one fundamental difference could not be denied, for, after all, the premise of these visits was that we were building up an institute with one seminal objective that they did not share, namely to serve our university and to integrate the new institute into the existing academic framework of a 550 year-old university. Over the course of time we found that this feature of establishing an IAS *within* a traditional university and as part and parcel of this university made all the difference you could imagine, posed different challenges and opened up different potential. And it is with the ambition to learn more about the specifics of this new, 'hybrid' type of UBIAS that we have invited representatives from institutions similar to our own in this one, central respect: we all belong to Institutes for Advanced Study within a larger university context, institutes for whose identity it is vital to constantly define and redefine the relationship with their home institutions.

Of course, once we decided that we would scrutinize this particular type of university-based institute more specifically, we immediately found that these institutions are fairly different from each other.

So, the first question really is whether UBIAS do constitute a type of institution in their own right at all, or whether we find ourselves confronted with a multifarious continuum of different institutional settings, where the boundaries between UBIAS and university departments, humanities centres, research clusters or other types of inter-departmental centre are fuzzy and blurred. Or, to put it more bluntly: Does it make sense to have invited precisely this selection of institutes represented at the Freiburg conference?

As you will see, your answers to our questionnaire *do* lead us to the positive conclusion that there is indeed a set of common features that could serve to draft a working definition of what constitutes an UBIAS. Yet having said that, we need to be aware, at the same time, of the specific differences and dissimilarities existing between our institutes – and the conference will give us ample opportunity to discuss them in great detail.

**Key features of UBIAS**

Based on the information provided by your answers to our questionnaire, we would like to outline a number of relevant characteristics of University-Based Institutes for Advanced Study, stressing common traits as well as distinctions. After sketching some general characteristics we will look at some particularly interesting aspects in more detail.

The questionnaire had been sent to all 32 participating institutes in advance. It served to gather basic statistical information about the institutes as well as insights into their ways of working and their strategic objectives. The questionnaire tried to take into account the multifarious variety of existing institutional settings and left a broad flexibility to adequately portray the specific profile of each institution. The findings presented at the conference do not claim to provide reliable empirical data; instead they intend to point out some interesting points for further discussion.

Taking up the main idea of traditional Institutes for Advanced Study, such as Princeton or the Wissenschaftskolleg Berlin, UBIAS pursue the promotion of excellent and innovative research by providing space, time and necessary facilities to outstanding researchers and promising young academics. Exempt from (some or most) other duties, the beneficiaries of these institutes, most often called "fellows", are enabled to (fully) concentrate on their research and pursue their projects – be it as individual researchers or in close collaboration with research groups or teams. The basic idea is that excellent research needs excellent working conditions, and this includes the creation of a lively and inspiring academic environment. By creating this space *within* the university, UBIAS support the maintenance and enhancement of scholarly excellence within their university as a whole and play an important role in the promotion of young scientists.

Furthermore, UBIAS are typically characterised by the ambition to bring together the best researchers for a certain period of time, and these researchers are, more often than not, recruited both from the institute's own home-

university *and* from the worldwide academic community. Thus, UBIAS provide a platform for international scientific exchange and bring top-level scholars to their university; they are a formidable tool for furthering a research university's internationalisation and strengthening its inter-institutional collaborations. Some institutes, however, prefer to concentrate on the academic potential of their home universities; a few others admit external scholars only. This could lead us to questions about the right balance between researchers from outside and from within the university.

Focusing on individual researchers and their profiles, fellowships are the most important, most frequently applied and most visible instrument in supporting and invigorating excellent research. The promotion of outstanding *individual investigators* is a core objective of many of our institutes. Nevertheless, research *groups* or *teams* play an important role in the setting of many institutes as well, especially in connection with interdisciplinary research activities.

There are vast differences in the number of fellows visiting our institutions every year. An average size for a UBIAS would be somewhere in the range of 30 to 50 fellows per year, but there are lots of institutes with smaller figures as well.

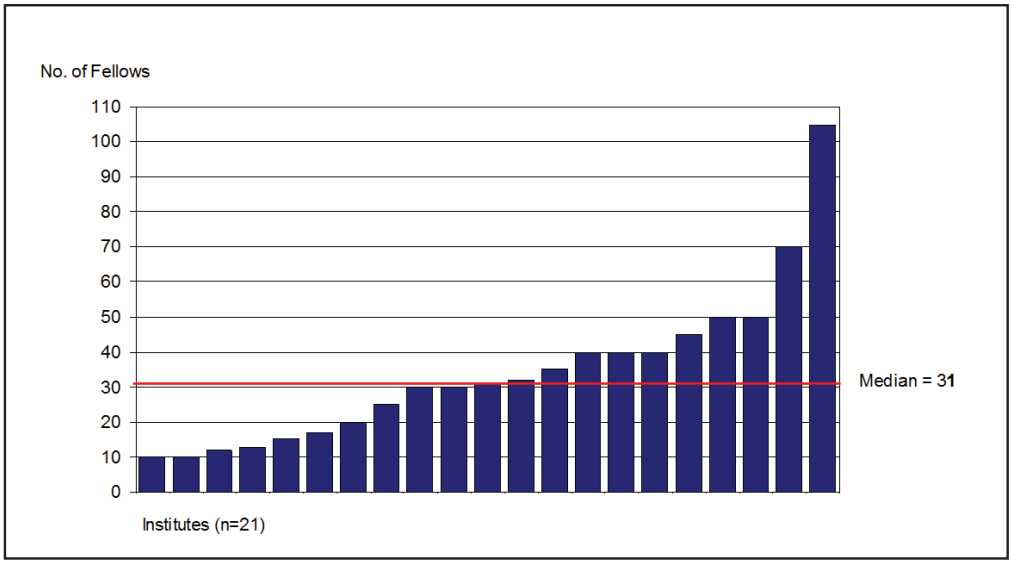


Diagram 1: No. of fellows per year at different institutes

There is a wide scope of possible arrangements and types of fellowship: internal/external fellows, resident fellows, visiting fellows, summer fellows, senior fellows, junior fellows, early career fellows, postdoctoral fellows, even teaching fellows.

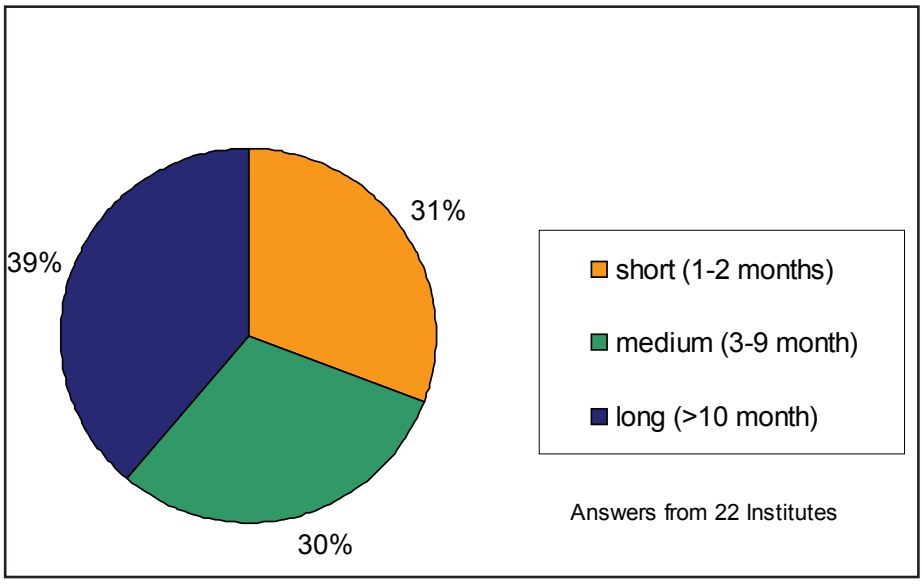


Diagram 2: Duration of stay / Length of fellowship

The duration of fellowships typically varies between a couple of weeks or months and several years; permanent fellowships are the rare exception, though they do exist. Most institutes recruit their fellows through open advertisement and an (international) application process often monitored by their advisory boards or other high-ranking selection committees; some also invite outstanding researchers *ad personam* to assume a fellowship at their institute. It would be interesting to learn from your experiences in this field: Which procedures and arrangements did you find to be successful for identifying the best possible candidates for a fellowship and for promoting outstanding research? Are there differences between the academic disciplines; different needs; other priorities and considerations?

With respect to the involvement and commitment of their fellows, most institutes expect regular participation in their academic activities, such as seminars, colloquia, workshops etc. As a rule, fellows are asked to present their work to other fellows and/or members of the university during their fellowship and to actively participate in other fellows' presentations and the ensuing discussions. Some institutes consider regular social activities like joint lunches, dinners etc. (several times a week or even daily) an important part of their programme; and quite a number of them have an explicit residence obligation.

The original idea behind the Princeton IAS was to free researchers from the burdens associated with working at a university – including teaching. In this tradition, most institutes do not have formal teaching requirements, but some expect their fellows to give lectures which may often be public (or at least accessible to a wider university audience), and a small number specifically combine

fellowships with teaching (mainly postgraduate teaching) and stress the importance of teaching or other forms of exchange with young researchers (e.g. acting as supervisor for research students).

Judging from the answers to our questionnaire, most institutes open their events to students, but teaching is usually not required, and only some institutes have specific graduate or postgraduate programmes of their own. At some places there are elaborated programmes and strong efforts to involve students, mostly graduates and doctoral candidates, in the institute's activities; others have a very limited degree of student participation and some none at all. There obviously exists a broad spectrum of possibilities between the strong integration and the total exclusion of students.

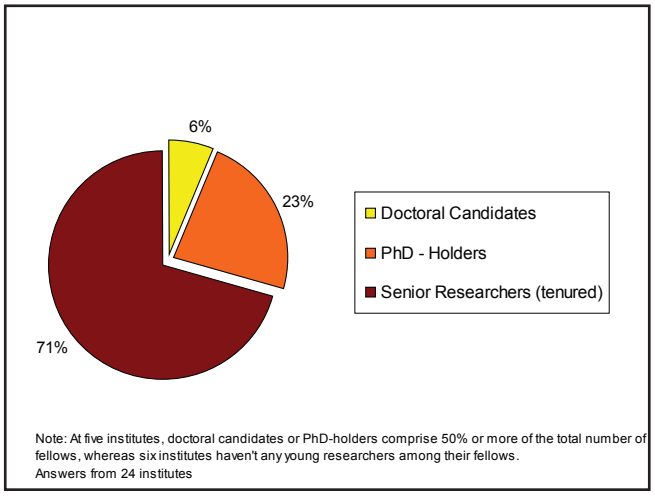


Diagram 3: Career status of fellows

Most institutes are generally open to a wide range, if not all disciplines, but quite a number of them do focus on a smaller set of disciplines, be it from the humanities, the social sciences or the natural and technical sciences. Only some have very strong disciplinary foci or explicit disciplinary exclusions.

A larger number of institutes, rather than identifying themselves through disciplines, announce thematic programmes or particular research fields and gather individual researchers or research groups (from different disciplines) around these topics. Generally speaking, for many institutes the arrangement of their activities around projects or programmes seems to be more attractive than a structure based on the departmental affiliation of fellows. Again, it would be interesting to learn more about the reasoning behind these concepts and about your experience with these different models: What are the advantages and disadvantages of the various options, i.e. of thematic or disciplinary foci as opposed to a broader orientation?

## Specific aspects and goals

### *Interdisciplinarity*

*Interdisciplinarity* has become an omnipresent buzzword in the academic world. According to your answers to our questionnaire, almost all institutes confess to a strong interest in the promotion of interdisciplinary research, exchange, collaboration and dialogue. They support and encourage exchange between the disciplines and provide time and space for it. They also stress the interdisciplinary orientation of many of their events. But only some institutes communicate interdisciplinary research as their main objective and criterion for the application and selection of their scholars.

As the definition and practice of interdisciplinarity seems to be one of the most challenging objectives, we would like to look at this aspect in some more detail:

• There are rather light forms of interdisciplinary exchange, e.g. interdisciplinary conferences with participants from different disciplines looking at one subject from different perspectives; or general/informal exchange between fellows from different disciplines. This kind of exchange seems to be very common.

• Stronger forms of interdisciplinary exchange include actual collaboration in joint research projects between fellows from neighbouring disciplines (e.g. between historians and archaeologists or between mathematicians and theoretical biologists).

• Strong forms of interdisciplinary exchange include collaboration between different "academic cultures" (e.g. between fellows from the humanities and natural sciences), thus crossing established boundaries between the academic disciplines/cultures.

An interesting German example for this kind of strong interdisciplinary setting is the Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Forschung (ZIF) in Bielefeld, where interdisciplinary research groups (drawing scholars from different disciplines) build the core of the institute; we have seen similar institutional arrangements at other places.

## Relations between UBIAS and the university

The very coining of the term UBIAS suggests that the specific relationship between an Institute for Advanced Study of this particular type and the university it is based at or affiliated to is a key-feature of its identity and therefore deserves special attention. Through our questionnaire we wanted to learn more about this special constellation: How is your institute integrated into the larger institutional framework of your university? To what extent is it dependent on the university and how high is its degree of autonomy?

Relations between research centres of our special kind and 'their' universities at large concern different levels: in terms of governance it is interesting to

describe administrative, financial and scientific autonomy as opposed to patterns of dependency. The following constellation seems to be representative for a large number of institutes: they are relatively autonomous in their academic and research curriculum, yet strongly dependent with respect to their financial budget and usually closely linked to the university's administration. Nevertheless, there are also a few cases of budgetary autonomy. But most institutes depend, to some extent at least, on their university's funding (combined with other sources like state funding, private donations or endowments). In times and contexts of limited, often shrinking university budgets, finding alternative ways of funding, not the least from private sources, seems to be one of the most important and challenging tasks for the future.

What are the benefits of the IAS for the university? Or, quoting an idea from one of the answers to our questionnaire: Is an IAS an important and invigorating elixir to the university or just pure luxury? In our opinion – and in accordance with many answers in the questionnaire – Institutes for Advanced Study ideally function as incubators for innovative research fields and assemble a critical mass of outstanding researchers who, benefitting from relatively favourable conditions and making the best productive use of them, produce outstanding research. Thus, research centres can inject energy into the research culture of the university and enhance the university's academic excellence and visibility.

IAS can play an equally important role in the internationalisation of their universities by attracting international top-level researchers and connecting them with the local academic community. Of course, there are considerable differences regarding the extent to which members of the faculties are integrated into the institute, or the degree to which university students and teachers join forces in fruitful contact with the fellows of the research institute.

Beyond describing perceivable benefits for the universities it does seem legitimate, however, to ask yet another, somewhat wider question: To what extent does the institute play back into society at large? This leads to the question of public outreach, which was often mentioned in the questionnaires: apart from offering typical academic "formats" such as seminars, conferences, workshops and lectures, some institutes in particular emphasise their role as public "think tanks" and put a lot of effort into planning events of greater public outreach and resonance – such as public lectures – explicitly aspiring to public attention, impact, and debate. Some institutes also engage with the arts, staging art exhibitions or offering fellowships for artists in residence. It would be interesting to learn more about your respective ventures in this direction.

*Networking, interaction*

International and/or inter-institutional collaboration and exchange are considered highly important features by all institutes. But again there are varying forms and degrees of collaboration – from loose contact to formal agreements and partnerships. Almost all of the institutes already interact on national

and/or international levels, and some are members of pre-existing networks like SIAS (the association of "Some Institutes for Advanced Study", founded by a number of renowned IAS of the autonomous Princeton type), NetIAS (a network of European IAS) or CHCI (the well established international Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes). A number of other institutes have defined formal partnerships with selected institutes of their own choice.

**IAS and the future of the university**

Overall, our findings show that UBIAS are an institutional type flexible enough to adapt to very different local conditions, yet at the same time consisting of a recognisable set of relatively stable features and characteristics. Looking at these will help us to interpret the last finding from our small questionnaire: considering the founding dates of the institutes assembled at the conference, a steep rise since the late 1990s becomes apparent. And this holds true although the concept of the IAS, and even that of the IAS connected to a university, is everything but new.

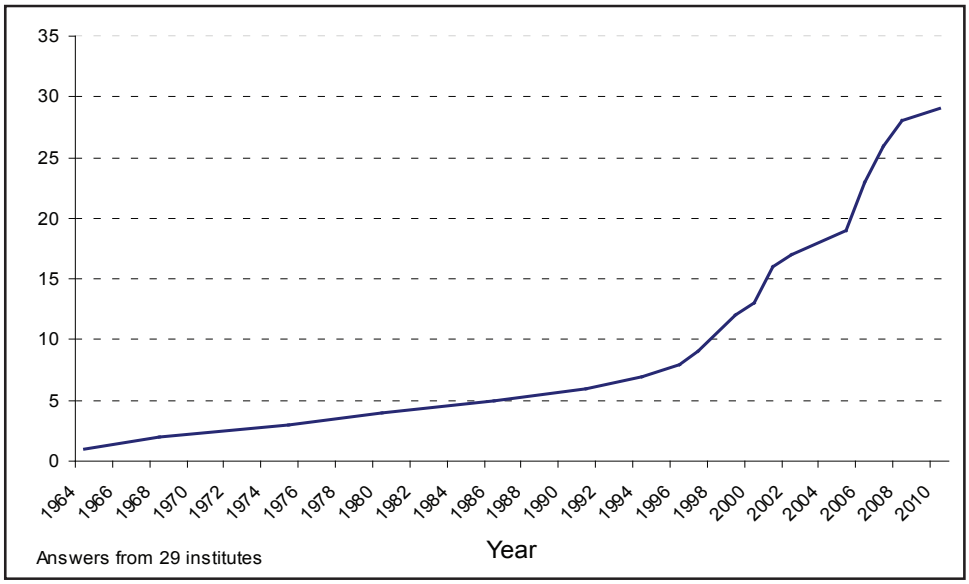


Diagram 4: Year of founding of participating institutes

Of course, this diagram poses the question of how things will develop in the next few years. Are we going to witness the foundation of yet more UBIAS in the years to come? And what will their specific function be in the wider picture of higher education and research worldwide?

One assumption, a rather defensive one, could be that a number of universities, unable to thoroughly transform the whole of their institutional setup, might instead be tempted to concentrate financial and intellectual resources in such centres and use them as flagships or figureheads, diverting attention from the shortcomings of the larger "rest" of the university. In the face of continuing

budget cuts in many countries and the inability or unwillingness of many state governments to invest substantially into their underfinanced universities, this might be a strategy we have to reckon with.

A more optimistic view might perceive UBIAS as laboratories, an experimental and vicarious playground where universities contemplate in which direction to transform themselves in the future. UBIAS would then be an indicator for the need of such processes of re-orientation – and might themselves be a helpful tool in steering this change. In this vein, it seems legitimate to ask what kind of lessons our experience with the particular institution that is an UBIAS could teach us about the future development of universities at large.

*Participating institutes of advanced studies based in Universities (Ubias).*

With these different driving forces in mind, let us briefly consider five core aspects of the UBIAS concept and discuss them both as indicators of possible shortcomings of universities as a whole *and* as indicators of how the transformation of universities might proceed in the years to come.

The key-component of all UBIAS activities is probably that of bringing academics from different universities, countries and continents together for a duration long enough to allow for dense communication and personal acquaintance. These, in turn, form the basis for all meaningful and productive academic collaboration. IAS in a certain sense occupy the middle ground between meeting at a conference and hiring academics for longer periods or on a permanent basis. Evidently, many universities feel the need to better support such medium-term exchange.

Secondly – as we have seen – most IAS do stress the individual personal-

ity and profile of the academics invited. IAS explicitly are not just integrated research institutions. Rather, an important part of their work is to grant their fellows the freedom to pursue projects of their own choosing. From a German perspective (and perhaps from other national backgrounds as well) this can be interpreted as a counter-reaction against the managerialism and the ensuing red tape that often characterises today's university life. Although this sort of freedom takes on different forms in different disciplinary areas, the idea behind it appeals to the humanities as well as to the social and natural sciences. Should we not wish for other parts of the university to enjoy the same freedom? Or is this wishful thinking?

Thirdly, we might interpret the growing number of UBIAS as a means for universities to reassure themselves about the culture of academic life. This is very much about the lost intimacy and intensity of dialogue, which sadly characterises the realities of many of today's universities in a mass higher education system. The established IAS evidently function as an inspiration in this respect. Do not all modern universities feel the drawbacks of their size and experience the massive division of labour in modern research environments as obstacles for communication and exchange?

Fourthly, UBIAS are a symbolic acknowledgement of universities' self-obligation to give extra support to high-level research and to commit themselves to very high standards of excellence. These, of course, need to be upheld across the whole of our respective universities. To safeguard these standards is surely one of the most important tasks in all university leadership. In this perspective, UBIAS may serve as a constant example or reminder for upholding the highest quality standards.

Finally, a surprising aspect of this boom of newly established IAS may be that this is a type of institution that emphatically excludes teaching. Isn't it a surprising twist that universities are adopting a model – IAS – that once was an explicit alternative to universities and their overload of teaching and training? Surely UBIAS are not just another university department. How then can we explain that such institutions prosper at a time when the world's leading universities almost unanimously stress the continuing importance of integrating teaching and research? This holds true for Germany as well, where the ideas of Humboldt are still an important orientation mark. UBIAS certainly cannot be a model for universities in this respect. However, we do feel that, in many ways, high-level research within universities does need additional – or better – support. If UBIAS succeed in this respect, this in turn opens up the possibility of reintegrating advanced and graduate students, providing valuable opportunities for them to participate in research and academic discourse at a truly advanced level. As there are certain tensions between these different aims, we can perceive different viable solutions. Obviously, we have an important topic to discuss here.

## Conclusion

In this brief presentation we have tried to give you a first glimpse of the kind of self-description of a representative group of UBIAS institutes: just a first impression of different institutional designs and setups, of the core characteristics as well as of the manifold varieties and options linked with the realities of existing UBIAS institutes in their specific local contexts around the globe. We firmly hope that this conference will provide orientation and stimulation for the further development of our existing institutes, as well as encourage all those universities worldwide that are presently considering the establishment of similar institutes. The future of the university in the 21*st* century and the role of UBIAS in the further advancement of academic research are topics of truly global importance that concern us all, and we do look forward to hearing your views on these exciting matters in the further course of this conference.

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