

Morten Kyndrup

AIAS, Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies

# Why UBIAS?

## Purposes and challenges for the network

*Speech on the Occasion of the Opening of the UBIAS Directors' Conference, 2018, IEA, São Paulo, Brazil*

It is an honour for me, and a great pleasure, to welcome all of you on behalf of UBIAS, here in São Paulo. And let me extend a warm thank you to IEA, São Paulo, for hosting us.

UBIAS was founded in 2010, in Freiburg, and was in fact an initiative from FRIAS, the Freiburg Institute of Advanced Studies. Since then, there has been a series of meetings and conferences, in New Delhi, Jerusalem, Vancouver, Nagoya, and the latest “regular” Directors’ Meetings have been those in 2014 in Taipei, Taiwan, 2016 in Birmingham, England, and now in 2018 in São Paulo, Brazil. Moreover, this is the first time that a Directors’ Conference is taking place in the so-called “New World”, and even in the southern hemisphere. Hence, the title of the UBIAS Directors’ Meeting, “UBIAS in the

New World – UBIAS in a New World”. Today, UBIAS has 39 members, and at this conference, an additional five institutes have been invited, following an application round, to present themselves in order to obtain membership. But at least half a dozen other institutes are represented here – institutes in the making, guest members, and others interested in the network and our activities.

Now, a good question to be asking on an occasion like this one is of course, “why UBIAS?” Why such a network? In my opinion, this question should be answered at various levels.

One is of course about general exchange of experiences among institutes for advanced study. The majority of the institutes of this world is relatively young and the exchange of all kinds of procedures, “best practices” is extremely useful. I have personally stolen many good ideas from colleague institutes during the development of our institute, Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, Denmark. We can obviously learn from each other’s procedures for selection; infrastructure (i.e. how many mandatory versus offered activities for fellows should there be); governance structures; administrative organization; experience with evaluations of institutes (we are currently going through an international evaluation in Aarhus, and we will be happy to share our experience about both process and results).

But secondly, besides these general subjects, we have some specific reasons for sharing experiences, in our capacity of exactly university-based institutes. We all have a “mother” university, and we all have – at least potentially – a delicate relationship to that mother university, for obvious structural reasons.

Since we are supposed to be “outside” of the ordinary university structure, possessing an amount of relative autonomy, a certain ambivalence between dependence and independence, is unavoidable. Our usefulness for our universities is part of an ongoing agenda. What are we good for? Such questions are often asked based on a day-to-day logic, ignoring the fact that results of institutes like ours are to be accountable and visible mainly on a long-term basis. The same fact of incongruity of time cadences makes us vulnerable, especially concerning funding. Whenever times are getting rough economically, we are subject to potential financial threats from our universities. We all know many frightening examples of this. Now, these conditions of course change from time to time, from institute to institute. But, we do share these challenges and accordingly, the exchange of our experiences makes very good sense.

Finally, a third field of joint interest is of course the question about the very concept of institutes for advanced study. The building up, the strengthening, and the development of the concept. Why so? Why is this interesting?

Well, obviously the concept as such is historically connected with prestige, with symbolic value, with high status. This high status is important, even imperative for our endeavours to attract the best scholars. We are thus all obliged to accept and to respect that concept – without which we may degenerate to just being “a nameplate on a wall”. And we all know examples of institutes like that – a nice nameplate on the wall of a building, with next to nothing when entering. But of course handling the concept represents a real dilemma, also for a network like UBIAS. How can you negotiate the wish for

being inclusive; welcoming everybody, on the one hand, while on the other hand maintaining certain standards in respect of the concept?

The practical solution in UBIAS has been different levels of membership, combined with a policy of inviting everybody interested to the meetings and to talks, while maintaining certain criteria for full membership. Thus establishing a, one could say closed, yet still completely open club.

But that of course does not solve the problem of where to draw the line, how to define and to develop the concept of an institute for advanced study in general, and of university-based institutes for advanced study in particular. I guess everybody can see the Scylla and Charybdis between a totally broad concept of institutes for advanced study on the one hand leading to a watering down of the concept, making it possible for all universities to have their own institutes for advanced study, without really making the effort of creating one. That would lead to a process, where institutes for advanced study eventually lost their distinct symbolic value, and their attractiveness with it.

On the other hand, a too closed, too exclusive concept might block up the access for new initiatives to profit from the learning processes during the international interchange of experiences among the institutes. And eventually, the phenomenon of institutes for advanced study, thus might die in an anaemic exclusivity. So, somewhere in between...

However, I do not personally believe in *one* model or recipe for institutes of advanced study. This can be done in different ways, all at the end of the day respecting

the principle of such institutes as a kind of “loyal opposition to academia, inside academia” (Dr. Wilhelm Krull’s expression), making it possible to offer the best conditions for genuine “researcher-driven research”. Researcher-driven research – that may sound like a pleonasm, but unfortunately it is not, in the ordinary university systems of today.

I hope this conference and our discussions will contribute to further developing and defining this balance between too loose and too narrow definitions of our work, between letting everybody in and ruling everybody out. Of course, I also hope that the UBIAS, as a network, during this conference will grow even better and stronger as a joint platform for the development of our institutes in the future.

So, on behalf of UBIAS, once again, thank you to our hosts, IEA – Instituto de Estudos Avançados da Universidade de São Paulo, and welcome everybody to São Paulo, to this Directors’ conference 2018.