



FRIAS – A UNIQUE RESEARCH COLLEGE

The Excellence Initiative's call for the pursuit of unconventional paths was taken seriously in Freiburg, with the foundation of the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS) in 2008 marking an innovative and courageous step. There have been outstanding international examples of Institutes for Advanced Study (IAS) being set up by universities, and right from the start FRIAS benefitted greatly from other, established institutes sharing their experiences generously. What was new, however, was the attempt to use an instrument for promoting outstanding academics to raise an entire university's profile – to an extent which would make the institute more than a pretty jewel in the university's crown, but a beacon of excellence.

What was needed was an unconventional approach because like many other universities, the University of Freiburg had to reconcile conflicting

objectives which seemed to make any attempt at small steps and low-risk change futile right from the start. These aims included international competition in research and securing a wide range of courses, the necessity of creating a strategic profile and of maintaining freedom for the researchers, immunisation against short-term trends and an open mind for new challenges. In fact, the list could be continued.

The FRIAS concept constituted a balanced, non-trivial, and even bold response to these conflicts. The core elements of FRIAS's architecture were: the basic decision to create schools with a thematic focus yet interdisciplinary approach (1), the commitment to place individual researchers at the centre of all activities (2), the idea of setting temporary areas of focus in research (3), the promotion of an adequate 'culture' of academic work (4), a multi-level



approach to encouraging interdisciplinarity (5) and, last but not least, an emphasis on the ‘altruistic’ aspect of promoting research (6). Taken together, all of these aspects fulfilled the objectives laid down in the FRIAS Statutes: promoting top-level academic research, internationalisation, fostering early-stage researchers, stimulating exchange across disciplines (“New Universitas”).

(1) FRIAS’s central task was to bring together researchers and scholars from different countries and disciplines to the benefit of all. The basic concept laid down in the Statutes aimed at building four schools, with a thematic focus and comprising comparably large units, which each in itself would act as a key centre for promoting communication and professional exchange amongst colleagues. The schools quickly became disciplinary centres of wide international repute. Bringing together researchers from Freiburg and all over the world, as well as academics at different stages in their careers, has been particularly worthwhile, and meant that FRIAS fellowships enabled an in-depth exchange between fellows as opposed to merely fleeting encounters.

All of the schools managed surprisingly quickly to attract outstanding external researchers to complete stays at the institute. This was also true for promising early-stage academics, as the excellent quality of the young postdoctoral researchers recruited became apparent as more and more Junior Fellows of the first generation were appointed to attractive posts both in Germany and abroad. The schools’ rapid success was a positive expression of Freiburg’s research strength in the four academic fields – and of the university’s courage in

continuing to promote these areas. Furthermore, the academic achievements of FRIAS and its four founding schools is reflected in the large number of important publications, outstanding conferences, awards and acquisition of new third-party funds. Beyond this quantifiable academic output, FRIAS was also to have effects on the structure of the university and serve as a catalyst for academic research. The collaborative research centres (SFBs) created in recent years, which received notable support from the related schools, the substantial additional third-party funds and the setting of new focus areas, such as Literature and Science or Systems Biology, Comparative European History or Quantum Efficiency, are just some of the rewards that the college reaped for the university’s entire research community. In addition, FRIAS made a considerable contribution to the University of Freiburg’s internationalisation.

(2) Just like other Institutes for Advanced Study, FRIAS placed its individual researchers at the centre of its activities. Creating scope for research meant giving each and every fellow the possibility of realising their own research project with the best possible support, alongside the privilege of being part of an international community of fellows – and having the time to make the most of it. It also meant being able to invite important guests to give talks or organise international conferences without bureaucratic obstacles so that all of the fellows’ productive energy went directly and immediately into the academic project rather than into the efforts of submitting applications which may never have been granted. The all-round positive appraisals of this formed a contrast to some wide-

spread developments being observed in academia towards formalisation, ever tighter controls, the tendency for complicated procedures to be required for making every decision, and the need to quantify success at every step.

Strict quality standards applied in all of the schools and formed the indispensable basis of work at FRIAS; this, inevitably, also led to applicants being turned down and thus being disappointed despite the professionalism and transparency which governed the selection procedures. Individual selection was only possible because the university was courageous enough to make internal decisions, thus breaking new ground within German academia, all the while observing the “logic of differentiation” which the Excellence Initiative expressly promoted.

(3) The fellows were all part of a community in which time was to be dedicated to exchange, encounters and dialogue. The paramount place of contact were the weekly colloquia at the schools, which determined the college’s academic pulse and characterised the spirit of its lively discussion culture. These events were complemented by other formats which also fostered exchange between fellows: monthly Dinner Speeches and After Hours Conversations, a varied programme of cultural events, excursions, etc. Of course, views were also exchanged over lunch or during chance encounters in the kitchenette. Three momentous art exhibitions made possible by generous patrons, which predominantly showed works by southern German artists, and featured literary readings by renowned authors such as Uwe Tellkamp, Friedrich Christian Delius, Felicitas Hoppe, Ilija Trojanow

and many more greatly contributed to the FRIAS’ creative flavour.

In all of this, a congenial atmosphere of “concentrated leisure” was to mirror the seriousness of the work, while doing justice to the conviction that academia and research have a value which should be reflected in the ways in which they are practised. The fact that many research colleges have been set up in recent years is also an expression of the search for the academic culture of the future. As things stand, the main point of orientation for this search are English-speaking role models – this is also true for Freiburg. Nevertheless, FRIAS followed its own individual path, as manifested in the bilingual – and sometimes even trilingual – communication practised here.

(4) One of FRIAS’s fundamental ideas was that of establishing *temporary* areas of research focus. Professors at the university were to be given the opportunity of fully concentrating on one research project for a limited period of time. This kind of work is not possible during normal day-to-day university life, where teaching commitments, attending committee meetings and writing expert assessments are deemed at least equally as important as research, and where the burden found at large German universities of teaching too many students for too many hours a week often threatens to stifle any major research endeavours. The possibility of concentrating on a research project for a limited amount of time was a means to heed Humboldt’s call for equality between research and teaching. As a result, top-level academic research regained a legitimate place within the university. This initiative represented a contrast to non-university research institutions where



research and teaching are clearly separated. This is not to say that teaching did not benefit greatly from FRIAS, both in quantitative (many additional courses given by fellows) and qualitative terms. Academics were allowed to reconnect with their identity as research scholars, which in turn gave fresh impetus to their teaching. Having understood the necessary close ties between research and teaching and their mutual effects, FRIAS took the wind out of the sails of the all-too-simple dichotomisation of the two.

(5) FRIAS had the task of reconciling the promotion of interdisciplinarity and the concentration on clearly defined research areas in a meaningful way. Here, too, the creation of schools was a clever response to this apparent dilemma, because concentrating on subject areas allowed colleagues to engage in more intense discussions and simultaneously integrated academics from different disciplines. As early as 2009, interdisciplinary research groups were established in addition to the schools. The programme provided a forum for innovative, cross-disciplinary research projects at the university, particularly in the faculties not represented by

one of the four FRIAS schools. With this programme research projects could be supported during the early critical phase in which other means of promoting research very often do not exist. The Black Forest Retreats organised by the college's Junior Fellows also offered a valuable platform for stimulating discussions about fundamental questions surrounding academic work. FRIAS used these activities, which were carried out on various levels, to help fulfil the aim of activating the potential that is inherent in a full-range university such as Freiburg, but that needs to be given space within the university to emerge.

(6) Research colleges provide an arena for a variety of topics, with the overall objective of promoting academic and scientific knowledge. At FRIAS, this was applied in an even wider sense. For the simple reason that the overwhelming majority of fellows were external and international academics, at no time did research promotion merely concentrate on Freiburg. FRIAS in general was an experiment of national, and even European, importance, and the outcome of fellowship stays did more than just benefit the University of Freiburg, which nevertheless profited from the presence of outstanding academics from all over the world. FRIAS simultaneously and emphatically served the scientific community at large, whose dedication and strengths were embodied in the activities of the college, which built a platform that was visible far beyond Freiburg. Such an 'altruistic' approach to promoting research corresponded to the logic of academic work rather than to that of science policy, which considers universities

to be in competition with each other, expecting them to base all of their decisions on their institution's vested interests. Faced with these options, Freiburg leant towards the side of academia as a whole rather than that of securing an advantage for itself in the short term. This was an adequate and sustainable way of expressing the identity and self-understanding of a university with a long and dignified tradition located close to national borders.

By creating FRIAS, an experiment whose key elements have just been described, the University of Freiburg gave a seasonable response to the conflicting requirements placed on a research university in the 21st century global knowledge society. Based on this concept, FRIAS was extraordinarily successful in all of the tasks placed in front of it: promoting top-level university-based research, supporting early-stage academics, internationalisation, promoting exchange between the disciplines, all while providing important impetus to the university itself and the global scientific community. The search for adequate ways of organising academia and research is never at an end; the concept, the experience and the success of FRIAS can provide useful orientation for the future.

School	Fellowship type	Number of fellows	Proportion of women	Proportion of foreign nationals	Proportion with home institutions abroad
History	ESF	56	23%	43%	59%
	ISF	10	10%	10%	n.a.
	JF	33	48%	30%	30%
LiLi	ESF	100	35%	60%	67%
	ISF	25	24%	8%	n.a.
	JF	19	32%	37%	47%
LifeNet	ESF	11	18%	100%	100%
	ISF	9	22%	11%	n.a.
	JF	4	25%	25%	50%
Softmatter	ESF	14	29%	93%	100%
	ISF	9	11%	20%	n.a.
	JF	9	44%	44%	44%
IRG	ESF	7	14%	43%	57%
	ISF	14	21%	0%	n.a.
	JF	3	0%	0%	0%
Sum	ESF	188	29%	59%	69%
	ISF	67	19%	9%	n.a.
	JF	68	40%	32%	37%
	Total	323	29%	43%	48%

Fellows 2008–2013 (rounded percentages)

ESF = External Senior Fellow; ISF = Internal Senior Fellow; JF = Junior Fellow