

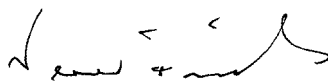


15th June 2012, the date that saw the University of Freiburg with its Institutional Strategy unsuccessful in the Excellence Initiative II, also marked a turning point for FRIAS. Without substantial funds from the initiative, designed to promote excellence, it will be impossible to maintain the research institute on its current scale. This despite the fact that the expert committee evaluated its academic performance very highly and recommended that its work be continued, albeit with a change in format. Over the next few months, it will be necessary to find a “FRIAS 2” concept with intelligent modifications, taking into account the key pointers from the referees’ assessment with a constructive and critical eye and – with greatly reduced resources but continued, uncompromising high academic standards of quality – striving hard to further intensify the connection between the institute and its university context, ideally with the university “as a whole”. Should it be possible to transform the institute in the manner suggested by the reviewers, to convince the university committees of the altered structure and to gain support from the State of Baden-Württemberg for this transformation, there will be no need to fear for the prosperous future of FRIAS.

However, the FRIAS of 2007 to 2012, the basic idea of which won over experts in the first round of the Excellence Initiative, was entrusted with quite a different mission: it was by no means intended to be a vehicle for developing the university’s overall structure at large, but destined to be a research college promoting top-level research in four specific and outstandingly strong academic fields at the Albert Ludwig University; fields with far-reaching dynamism chosen according to objective performance criteria. To cite the initial Excellence Initiative rhetoric, the institute was to act as a “beacon”. The aim, then, was to “strengthen recognised strengths” and highlight differences not only between universities but also within universities so as to narrow the gap, at least in some prominent fields, with the world’s leading research universities. For this purpose, according to its statutes passed by the Senate in 2008, FRIAS in its four “schools” (two each from the humanities and the natural sciences) was to open “windows for research” for Freiburg’s top researchers, to significantly influence international research discourse in the selected academic fields through an innovative curriculum, to offer outstanding junior researchers a platform where they could actualize their full potential, and to significantly boost the international visibility and global networking activities of the Albert Ludwig University.

Measured in terms of these founding objectives, FRIAS can be justly proud of its achievements: since its inauguration in May 2008, it has offered privileged working conditions to 271 fellows from 34 countries and attracted scientists from over 80 nations to Freiburg for academic conferences. Within the FRIAS community, the 63 Internal Senior Fellows, i.e. Freiburg-based professors from all eleven faculties, constitute the largest group, occupying 36% of all fellowship time spent at the institute. Almost 900 scientific events, ranging from the weekly colloquia held by all schools – the intensity of whose discussions rapidly gained a legendary reputation – to guest lectures, workshops, panel discussions, large interdisciplinary conferences and symposia are testimony to FRIAS's excellent success rate as a working college. Likewise, over 1,500 academic publications in leading natural science journals, with international publishing houses and in the humanities schools' own book series bear witness to this high level of activity. The institute is especially proud of the spectacular success of its Junior Fellows, some of whom have their say in this issue. No fewer than 26 young FRIAS researchers made the jump to full professorships or other high-profile permanent positions in Germany and abroad within the first four years!

But facts and figures are not everything – the reputation and spirit of FRIAS are just as persuasively reflected in the opinions of many participating and external observers: LiLi Fellow Yael Maschler, a linguist from Haifa, praises her FRIAS stay as “the most fruitful and rewarding time in my academic life,” while LifeNet Fellow Kathryn Cheah, a biochemist from Hong Kong, recognises in “the dynamism and multidisciplinary of FRIAS [...] a unique opportunity for the University of Freiburg to raise its international profile and to extend its capacity for world-class research.” In a high-profile article in the “Süddeutsche Zeitung”, the doyen of German historians, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, described FRIAS as “one of the most prominent institutions brought to life by the Excellence Initiative”, going on to say that it is “obvious to every expert that FRIAS represented an all-round success story” and “without a doubt ranks first among similar institutes across Germany”. But it is to Freiburg-based psychotherapist Carl Eduard Scheidt that we will give the last word – he has this to say about his experience in the interdisciplinary FRIAS research group on trauma narratives: “After almost 30 years working at the university (and University Medical Centre), over the course of the past few months I have come to know and appreciate FRIAS as a centre for open dialogue, interdisciplinary academic exchange as well as productive and dedicated research – in a way that I have never experienced before. Without being too emphatic, I would even go so far as to say that the original idea of the university has to a large extent become a reality here.”



Werner Frick

Speaker, FRIAS Board of Directors