

In the following, we present the main excerpts of the FRIAS Board of Directors' comments on the evaluation letter from the German Council of Science and Humanities (GCSH) dated 10.07.2012. The full statement, including confidential passages, was addressed to the University of Freiburg's governing bodies.

STATEMENT OF THE FRIAS BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON THE EVALUATION LETTER FROM THE GERMAN COUNCIL OF SCIENCE AND HUMANITIES (WISSENSCHAFTSRAT)

STATEMENT

(1) PROMOTION OF TOP-LEVEL RESEARCH AND INTERNATIONALISATION AS KEY-CRITERIA

A decisive starting point for the Excellence Initiative was the realisation that important, innovative areas of research had been increasingly migrating away from universities to independent research institutions since the 1980s. Since around 1998, the German Science Minister, German Council of Science and Humanities and other education policy committees had been voicing stronger complaints that this transferral of research was putting German universities at a clear disadvantage in international terms. A rapidly increasing disassociation between university research and teaching was also observed, whilst at the same time the number of students at universities saw a dramatic rise. This led to the conclusion that university research must be boosted, and top-level research in particular promoted, if German universities were to catch back up with international rivals and if the gap between universities and non-university research institutes were to stop widening. The creation of internationally acclaimed research centres at universities ("beacons") was to be a key tool in this strategy. At the same time, old notions of equality among

all universities and faculties in Germany were to be relinquished.

Freiburg's 2007 Institutional Strategy followed this basic idea by proclaiming to open up "Windows for Research". For this purpose, the Rectorate selected four vast disciplinary areas that, based on the data available, were considered to show the strongest research performance at the University of Freiburg; these four areas were to form the basis for the concept of FRIAS as developed in Institutional Strategy I.

In view of these facts, we should first note that, in their statement issued in July 2012, both the Joint Commission and the evaluation group in charge of the site visit declare that the University of Freiburg delivers excellent research particularly in those areas that were already deemed to be research strengths in 2007 (GCSH p. 3). These are almost identical to the fields represented by the four FRIAS Schools: life sciences, medicine and systems biology make up the FRIAS School of Life Sciences – LifeNet, engineering and its interdisciplinary ties to other natural sciences form the basis for the FRIAS School of Soft Matter Research. The humanities are represented with history, religious studies and social

sciences in the FRIAS School of History and with literary studies, linguistics, and cultural and cognitive sciences in the FRIAS School of Language & Literature. As a central strategic measure within the third funding line, FRIAS therefore represents precisely those key areas that enhance the profile of the university and that should provide a starting point for making the university as a whole more dynamic.

According to the basic concept formulated in 2007, the targeted promotion of these areas was intended to allow exceptionally innovative top-level research to take place that would be visible both within and outside Germany and at the same time would promote dynamic research within the university and permit the identification of strengths and weaknesses. In accordance with the Excellence Initiative application and assessment of the institution, FRIAS was designed and implemented as a model for "strengthening strengths" and thus for increasing the international visibility and competitiveness of selected disciplines at the University of Freiburg. Its success in securing numerous international fellows from 34 countries, as well as guests and conference participants

from over 80 countries, and in fostering their intensive exchange with the university have made a substantial contribution to making the University of Freiburg one of the most internationally respected institutions in these fields. Interdisciplinary collaboration in the Upper Rhine tri-border area of Basel-Strasbourg-Freiburg and the founding of the UBIAS network of university-based institutes for advanced study (with 34 member institutes from 19 countries on five continents) by FRIAS have equally contributed to raising the university's international visibility to a significantly higher level.

In the letter of evaluation, the academic achievements, research results and internationalising effect of FRIAS were acknowledged, yet no detailed tribute was paid to them. In contrast, the report focuses on organisational development as the central assessment criterion. This narrowing was not evident in the second call for applications to the Excellence Initiative and represents a shift away from the criteria laid down in 2007 as well as from the FRIAS goals that were formulated to satisfy them. It is incomprehensible why the German Council of Science and Humanities failed to adequately consider the criterion of outstanding research work in its statement.

(2) FRIAS AS PART OF THE UNIVERSITY

In contrast to the "impression of two institutions that exist in parallel and at most are only loosely connected" (GCSH p. 2), FRIAS and its four schools were and are a fundamental component of the university as a full-range university. At the same time, FRIAS has not been allowed to merge with the normal operations of

the university in order to maintain its character as a research college, which is discernible both nationally and internationally. This "half distance" was one of the main criteria for establishing an IAS within a university and is also one of the fundamental reasons why the University of Freiburg's concept was considered to be excellent in the 2007 round of evaluations. In this context, FRIAS functions as an integral research platform which, to a large extent, is supported by university colleagues based in Freiburg. Between 2008 and 2012, 63 Freiburg faculty members (senior professors) were appointed as Internal Senior Fellows and 59 Junior Fellows (some of them with very long contracts lasting up to five years) worked at FRIAS.

Over the course of the past few years, an intensive process of interaction has developed between the university's institutes and FRIAS. In the case of the natural science schools – whose experimental research achievements are only possible as a result of this interaction – the FRIAS research projects are conducted almost exclusively in facilities and laboratories owned by university institutes and using their infrastructure. Synergy effects have been created as a result of intensive interaction and collaboration between the research college integrated within the university and the related disciplines and resources within the university itself. In particular, FRIAS' success in fully integrating applied experimental natural science fields into the structures of an institute for advanced studies is one of the pioneering achievements that is most admired by other universities.

In the humanities, not least for the purposes of sparking produc-

tive unrest, FRIAS has triggered dynamic restructuring and a search for worthwhile joint projects (SFBs and graduate schools) in the cross-over area between history, literature and linguistics. A humanities-related SFB was secured in 2012 and a second one has just been recommended for implementation. This follows a period of many years with no humanities-based SFBs in Freiburg at all.

FRIAS has also developed concepts for promoting research initiatives in subjects that were not initially represented within its four schools. Since 2009, it has organised the annual competition for "Interdisciplinary Research Group" funding. Seven innovative research projects with a broad range of interdisciplinary foci have since received funding within this programme, involving academics from all 11 faculties at the University of Freiburg. This has de facto led to the creation of a fifth, interdisciplinary school that has enjoyed considerable success for three years now.

When the Grants Committee criticises the fact that "individuals within FRIAS" (GCSH p. 2) have primarily benefitted from the FRIAS research environment, it fails to appreciate another fact, namely that a large number of these individuals are academics based at the University of Freiburg (63 Internal Senior Fellows, 59 Junior Fellows since 2008). In accordance with the programme's promise to open up "Windows for Research" at the institute, these academics are afforded time to pursue an individual project for a defined period, after which they return to their institute within the university. If considered in terms of total fellowship months, Internal Senior Fel-

lows make up the largest of the three groups of fellows with a 36% share of the total. The selection of fellows does not, however, aim to ensure that all subject areas are equally represented. Instead, it follows the sole principle of competition according to academic criteria and solely resting on external evaluation from the schools' advisory boards to safeguard the quality of projects and individual researchers.

There are a host of examples that demonstrate the effects of FRIAS on the university. Large interdisciplinary events such as the Hermann Staudinger Lectures, talks from prominent guest speakers and the interdisciplinary symposia held every two years, as well as panel discussions, author readings and art exhibitions held at FRIAS all attracted listeners from all faculties and in large numbers. Numerous early-stage researchers from across the university, and PhD students in particular, have participated in the conferences and colloquia run by the four schools. News and announcements from the institute were sent to all members of the university twice each year in the "FRIAS News" and the institute's website (praised by many experts and users, and not least by many students), gave detailed insights into the work of the institute at all times, inviting readers to participate in the events.

(3) DEVELOPMENT OF THE SCHOOLS AND EVALUATION

A six-year funding cycle for the schools – extending to a maximum 12-year cycle if favourably evaluated – was an integral component of the FRIAS concept from the very beginning, and was laid down by the Senate in the FRIAS Statutes

(§ 6(1)). Such periods of time correspond to the usual funding cycles for large joint research projects, such as the collaborative research centres supported by the DFG (German Research Foundation).

The evaluators, in their report, paid insufficient attention to the fact that the four schools have transformed themselves considerably over the past few years in terms of subject areas and disciplines, notably allowing small and smaller subjects to be integrated productively into their work (contrary to suspicions, GCSH p. 7). As a result, subjects represented in the School of Language & Literature between 2008 and 2012, in addition to all major philological disciplines, included Medieval Latin Language and Literature, Scandinavian Studies, Slavic Studies, Ancient Greek Language and Literature, Dravidian Studies, Classical Chinese Language and Literature, Dance Science, Hebrew Linguistics, Icelandic Linguistics, Art History, Philosophy, Cultural Sociology and History of Science, whereas, the School of History hosted research on subjects such as Classical Archaeology, Islamic Studies, Sociology, Political Science, Legal Studies and the History of Science. A broad spectrum of subject areas was represented in the two natural science and engineering schools from the outset: the School of Life Sciences comprised Freiburg-based scientists from various fields within biology, medicine and physics, while a vast range of disciplines in engineering, physics, chemistry and pharmaceuticals contributed to the research agenda of the School of Soft Matter Research. Here, too, the interdisciplinary approach underwent continual development, and included close interaction and col-

laboration between the two schools.

In accordance with the Statutes (§ 8), all four FRIAS Schools were evaluated each year by the international experts on their advisory boards and constantly exchanged information with these experts concerning strategic research curriculum issues, the proactive recruitment of external academics, peer-review assessments of scientific publications, etc. At the same time (contrary to what is assumed by the GCSH, p. 3 f.), in accordance with § 9 of the Statutes, FRIAS as a whole was also subjected to annual assessments by an Advisory Committee comprising eleven highly-renowned international members and, pursuant to § 11(1) of the FRIAS Statutes, in 2011 underwent an extremely thorough evaluation. The reports of these evaluations were made accessible; the chairpersons of all advisory boards and the Advisory Committee (AC) were actively involved in the site visit from the GCSH Commission. In particular, the AC was required to evaluate the FRIAS Schools with respect to whether their funding should be extended beyond six years. In accordance with the Statutes, this assessment was to take place in 2013. It was therefore by no means guaranteed that the schools would continue to exist for 12 years (as is critically assumed by the GCSH, p. 2), such extensions merely represented an option depending on a favourable assessment from the AC and expert external evaluators.

The idea put forward by the audit team of reconfiguring FRIAS to make it "more inclusive and cover a wider range of subjects" by operating just two schools (GCSH p. 6 f.) was examined in detail when preparing the second application. During the

subsequent rounds of discussions, however, and particularly on the advice of the experienced external experts of the “Excellence Council I”, this idea was ultimately rejected by the Rectorate, or rather put aside in favour of maintaining the existing FRIAS model of four schools with distinct disciplinary profiles. The decision to continue the original model rested on the assumption that it comprises more distinct subject profiles and guarantees a greater amount of coherence between disciplines and thematic areas as well as providing a “critical mass” of expertise in the key academic fields.

If consideration is to be given in future to an alternative model “with two schools that cover a wider range of subjects”, as recommended by the Grants Committee (GCSH p. 7), care must be taken to ensure that sufficient internal coherence is achieved between the more openly defined schools and to guarantee that the present quality standards are maintained through objective external assessment. Any appearance that barriers to access are being lowered for the purpose of integrating the widest possible range of subjects and colleagues from all areas of the university would, within a very short span of time, inevitably destroy the reputation earned by FRIAS over recent years.

(4) PROMOTING EARLY-STAGE RESEARCHERS AND RECRUITING TOP-QUALITY FACULTY FOR THE UNIVERSITY

FRIAS has played an outstanding role in promoting junior researchers. The number of national and international positions they have been offered is one of the college’s greatest successes: between 2009 and 2012, no fewer than 26 FRIAS Junior Fellowships were awarded professorships and other high-profile permanent positions in Germany and abroad. Despite this, the Commission criticises the fact that there has been no ongoing recruitment in the faculties from among the FRIAS Fellows secured for Freiburg from around the world (GCSH pp. 2 and 4). At the joint meetings with the Rectorate in 2008 and 2009, FRIAS repeatedly and emphatically drew attention to this probable expectation from evaluators hailing predominantly from the Anglo-Saxon world. Nevertheless, all FRIAS’ endeavours to prevent the loss of excellent Junior Fellows to other universities were fruitless. The fault for these failures does not lie with FRIAS.

[At this point, the confidential statement to the University of Freiburg’s governing bodies gives concrete examples for unsuccessful attempts to keep outstanding junior researchers in Freiburg on a long-time scale.]

In response to the criticism concerning traditional career paths (GCSH p. 4), it must be stressed that, in this context, the tradition of “Habilitation” in no way discriminates against foreign applicants since it serves only to provide standard evidence (not the only type of evidence) of additional aca-

ademic achievements. In the case of foreign applicants this can be, and is, replaced by evidence of “performance equivalent to Habilitation” in procedures which have long been standard routine. Furthermore, Habilitation itself is laid down in the Baden-Württemberg State Higher Education Act (§ 47(2)).

(5) TEACHING

The “negative side effects” of FRIAS Fellowships “on teaching” criticised by the Commission (GCSH pp. 2 and 4) concern one-off cases that occurred particularly during the initial phase when the institute was being established. In response to these cases, increased care was taken to develop new options, such as “part-time fellowships”, through constructive cooperation with the faculties affected. The statements concerning inadequate substitution of the directors and Internal Fellows delegated to FRIAS (GCSH p. 4) are also misplaced. The substitute positions were held exclusively by highly-qualified and advanced junior academics, who naturally administered all examinations and also trained PhD students. What is correct, is that an impressive number of those who acted as substitute chairholders for FRIAS Fellows have themselves now been appointed as professors. In our estimation, this in itself provides proof of the substitutes’ academic quality. Furthermore, the directors who were exempted from their teaching duties have, since 2007, continued to teach, administer examinations and supervise PhD students in addition to the substitutes who assumed full teaching loads. Since many Internal Senior Fellows from all the FRIAS Schools continue to hold lectures

and seminars (sometimes even basic introductory lectures in the natural sciences), and to assign Masters dissertations and PhD theses, the supervisory situation for students has improved – in some cases significantly – thanks to FRIAS.

Moreover, FRIAS was able to offer the faculties attractive classes and workshops held by Junior Fellows and External Senior Fellows, often in areas of the disciplinary curriculum that were so far unrepresented in Freiburg. Attention should also be drawn to the numerous high-calibre talks and workshops given by renowned international guest speakers and to the opportunities exploited by many advanced students and doctoral candidates to participate in the colloquia and conferences hosted by the FRIAS Schools, amongst other things.

(6) GOVERNANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY

[At this point, the confidential statement to the University of Freiburg's governing bodies comments on a number of criticisms that do not lie in the responsibility of FRIAS.]

When searching for alternative sources of funding, strategies that did not entail looking for industrial sponsors proved to be more promising (contrary to the recommendations of the evaluators, GCSH p. 5) – chiefly procuring fellowships that carried outside funding. This was primarily achieved by participating in consortia for the acquisition of joint grants from European and American funds (Co-fund, Eurias, AvH, VW Foundation, CHCI, ACLS, etc.). As the institute's reputation grew, it became easier to attract guest academics to FRIAS with

sabbaticals or fellowships financed by other means.

(7) SUMMARY

The Grants Committee did not base its decision on the academic performance of FRIAS as a research institution that will have a long-term effect on the university. Rather, its judgment was guided by the criterion of the overall development of the university as a whole. These two aspects were not deemed to complement one another, but to be mutually exclusive. However, FRIAS was not planned as a tool for restructuring the University of Freiburg nor as the common denominator of its integration. Instead it was intended to be a research institute of excellence that would radiate out from its four focal areas into the university and beyond. If the expectation of FRIAS was that it would function simultaneously as a “beacon” and as a vehicle for developing the university in its entirety, this would have overloaded the institute with unrealistic expectations and overstretched its responsibilities. Between 2007 and 2012, FRIAS was established as an institute intended to significantly increase the international visibility and research potential of the university using competitive, strictly quality-oriented processes to attract top-quality researchers, to narrow the gap between Freiburg and top-level universities around the world, and to boost the research reputation of the University of Freiburg overall. It was a privilege for us to play a part in developing such an outstanding institute.

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