

A brief history of institutes for advanced study

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The idea of advanced study is the idea of a free pursuit of learning “to the utmost degree that the facilities of the institution and the ability and faculty of the students will permit”. This was the stated purpose when the first institute of this type, located at Princeton, was founded in 1930 as a postdoctoral research institution. Like a traditional university it was devoted to the promotion of learning, but its scale was smaller and it did not offer formal instruction. Nor did it have large laboratories. It was to be a place for the most highly specialised research, yet it provided an atmosphere open to intellectual exchange across all disciplinary boundaries. Among the sources of inspiration were All Souls College at Oxford and the Collège de France in Paris.

The IAS at Princeton sought at the same time to embody the Humboldtian idea of a university and an Oxford college tradition of commensality, contemplation and tranquillity. In this the IAS came to play a crucial role and to provide an institutional home for some of the most famous intellectual refugees, among them Albert Einstein, John von Neumann and Kurt Gödel. In the years since its creation, the IAS has achieved a position that is unrivalled in the world of science and scholarship. In all fields where it has been engaged, its contributions have set the standards against which other contributions may be measured. Maybe because of its very success, the IAS was for a long time the only institute of its kind. The idea of replicating an institution of this kind seemed beyond the limits of practical possibility, at least of any European government or foundation in the period after the Second World War.

It was in this context, though, that a second major institute for advanced study was established in 1954 through an initiative of the Ford Foundation. This was the famous Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) at Palo Alto. It was smaller in scale than the IAS at Princeton – it did not have a couple of hundred but only some 47 residential scholars each year – and a focus on the social and human sciences rather than on the entire field of human knowledge. However, it was a scholarly domain broadly defined. Its fields “include but are not limited to anthropology, art history, biology, classics, economics, education, geography, history, law, linguistics, literature, mathematical and statistical specialities, medicine, musicology, philosophy, political science, psychiatry, psychology, and sociology”. In these fields the Palo Alto Center very rapidly acquired a worldwide renown and was seen as a kind of powerhouse of the transformations occurring in the social and human sciences. Contrary to the Princeton Institute, the CASBS had no permanent faculty but only residential fellows. Scholars could not apply, only be nominated as candidates to fellowships and decisions about invitations were – and are – preceded by a highly selective, competitive, and quite formalised process in which only a small fraction of the candidates are eventually successful.

The experiences of the IAS at Princeton and the CASBS at Palo Alto set milestones for all subsequent developments. The first of these was the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS) at Wassenaar, under the auspices of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. It was clearly modelled on the Stanford Center. This was true of its scholarly focus, of its option only to have visiting fellows, of its size, of its efficient library loans system, and even, one may add, of its volley ball court. Whereas the IAS and the CASBS had been overwhelmingly American institutions in terms of the composition of their fellows, NIAS had always a large component of non-Dutch scholars in residence but these however were also to a large extent linked to projects proposed by Dutch fellows.

Overall NIAS tended, a bit earlier than other institutes for advanced study, to emphasise the need not only to have distinguished individual scholars. It emphasised, more than both IAS and CASBS, the need to create clusters of scholars in the form of so-called research groups working on broad common themes. It is only in the recent past, after about three decades of existence, that NIAS has taken on some features that do not go easily with the Stanford model, such as having some permanent fellows – and of renaming the Director into a Rector.

Parallel to the Dutch developments, innovations were also contemplated in neighbouring Germany. The first such effort was directly related to the creation of what eventually became maybe the most successful of the post-war German universities, namely the University of Bielefeld in Northrhine-Westphalia. In this process a central idea from the very inception was to reinsert the philosophical-humanistic ideals, associated with the Humboldt brothers and early 19th century philosophical idealism, in the setting of a modern university. In the creation of such a new-humanistic university, the prominent German sociologist and educational thinker Helmut Schelsky thought that a centre for advanced study would be a crucial institution. This was the famous Centre for Interdisciplinary Research, or ZiF to use its German acronym, of which Schelsky became the first Director (1968-1971). Like NIAS, ZiF came to emphasise the role of thematically coherent research groups but unlike NIAS and CASBS, it insisted that all fields of knowledge should be included. These features have been characteristic of ZiF up until the present day.

In the latter half of the 1970's two further important initiatives were taken. In the United States, a National Humanities Center was created and could in April 1979 move into an elegant brand-new building in the Research Triangle Park in North Carolina. It was given the form of an independent, privately incorporated foundation with close links to the National Endowment for the Humanities, to foundations, not least, and like the CASBS, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and to many universities and other institutions. Its location in North Carolina also meant that it came to play an important regional role in the United States, and that the history of race relations in America came to be a perennial concern of the Center. The size of the NHC was roughly the same as that of NIAS and just slightly smaller than the CASBS.

At almost the same time, October 1978, a decision was taken by the City parliament in Berlin to establish an international centre for scholarly collaboration. It was explicitly stated that one purpose was “to re-establish the contact, interrupted by National Socialism, and war, with vital intellectual currents that are still underrepresented in Germany to this day”. As a consequence the Institute for Advanced Study Berlin, the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, was founded in 1980. The original financial support mainly came from the City of Berlin and the Volkswagen Foundation. Soon however, the Federal Government, and a range of foundations, came to support the institute on a major scale, and it now occupies an unrivalled position at the pinnacle of German academia. On its governing body, the Members' Assembly, are not only the Presidents of the Berlin universities but also those of the German Science Council, the German Research Society, the Rectors' Conference, the Max Planck Society, the German Academic Exchange Service, and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Recently, representatives from foundations in Switzerland and Sweden have also joined the assembly.

The Wissenschaftskolleg was modelled on the IAS at Princeton. Thus it shared with the Princeton institute a commitment to support all fields of science and scholarship. Most of its residential fellows were invited for a given academic year, but it also had a small number of permanent fellows. In practice most of its fellows tended to come from the humanities and the social sciences, but there was a commitment also to invite natural scientists, and gradually a

strong programme in theoretical biology became one of the characteristics of the Wissenschaftskolleg. Like the Princeton Institute, but even more energetically, it also strove to establish links to music, literature and the arts, and always had prominent representatives of these fields among its Fellows.

Shortly after these events, an initiative was also taken in Sweden, to explore the feasibility of establishing an institute of this type in Northern Europe as well. In 1985 the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences (SCASSS) was established as a national scientific institution located in the old university town of Uppsala. It had a significantly smaller number of scholars than the earlier mentioned institutes but tried to compensate for that by way of a rather ambitious project of international research networks. Despite its name, but like the Stanford Center, it soon became for all practical purposes a centre for advanced study in both the social sciences and the humanities at large. After a ten-year trial period, the Collegium became a permanent national institute for advanced study, chartered by the Government of Sweden and with a nationally composed board. Like its European sister institutes it sought to balance in roughly equal numbers scholars from domestic universities and from universities abroad as well as more senior scholars and exceptionally promising postdoctoral scholars.

In 1992 some of the then existing institutes for advanced study, namely the IAS, the CASBS, the NHC, the NIAS, the Wissenschaftskolleg, and SCASSS, decided to enter into an informal but, as it turned out, ever closer collaborative relationship. This occurred against the background of the momentous transformations in Central and Eastern Europe and the dramatically exposed need of support for high-quality research in this region. However, these institutes also came across growing concerns among academics in Western Europe and North America as well that an emphasis on short-term usefulness seemed more and more to limit possibilities for long-term research constrained only by the competence and imagination of the scholar her- or himself.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the initiatives that have been taken by this group of institutes to support high-quality foundational research in Central and Eastern Europe in the period since then. Most notably, perhaps, the first institute for advanced study in this region has been firmly established as an internationally prominent institution, namely the Collegium Budapest, founded in 1992. It is a Hungarian-based but truly international scholarly institution at the highest level, operating like the IAS at Princeton and at Berlin as an institute devoted to the support of all fields of science and scholarship. There have also been a number of relatively small-scale, but important, institutional endeavours that have been made possible by the so-called New Europe Prize, awarded by the collaborating Western institutes. These initiatives have supported research e.g. in St Petersburg, Bucharest, Budapest, Prague and Krakow. In some instances such as the New Europe College in Bucharest and the Bibliotheca Classica in St Petersburg, the institutions created have become crucial ones in their respective settings. Recently, yet another centre for advanced study, this time in Sofia, Bulgaria, has been created through a similar collaborative initiative.

In parallel, there is a growing number of initiatives in other European countries, but also beyond, including Japan (most notably the International Institute for Advanced Studies in the Kansai Culture and Science City) and China as well as South Africa (StIAS), to establish or to strengthen centres for advanced study.

As a consequence of growing pressures for immediate usefulness, there is an obvious and growing need for free meeting places and for spaces where reflection is not seen as incompatible with societal engagement. Institutes for advanced study provide such spaces where activities in accordance with the inner needs of science and scholarship itself are the pre-eminent concerns. Such needs have been voiced in a number of reports. They have also become apparent indirectly in a variety of ways, e g by the dramatic growth of university based centres, recently involving the transformation of Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, into the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study operating in a way similar to the national centres for advanced study.

It is clear that centres and institutes for advanced study are destined to play an ever more important role in the international scholarly landscape in the years ahead. They are uniquely well placed to provide an encouraging and supportive environment for post-doctoral researchers and thus in forming the next generation of leading scholars. Most of all, they are crucial as free intellectual meeting places and as places where scholarly serendipity and curiosity are respected and given the conditions to flourish.