

Interdisciplinary Research and Graduate Education – Experiences from the Humanities and Social Sciences

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Ever since Freie Universität Berlin was founded in 1948, the university has stood for an open, international outlook and socially responsible cross-border research and teaching activities. Therefore, interdisciplinary research activities and related graduate training have a long tradition at the university. The institutional strategy of the university is characterized by several factors: striving for excellence within disciplines while at the same time promoting interdisciplinary excellence, establishing a broad variety of academic and scientific networks in the Berlin region, in Germany and internationally, and generating new research by supporting and initiating new areas of research collaboration (“focus areas”). Providing generous and targeted support for junior scholars and senior researchers interested in engaging in these endeavors is also one of the central elements of this strategy.

The university has established particular areas of research focus in several cooperative initiatives, such as those involving linguistics, art, social studies, and empirical psychology (in the interdisciplinary research center “Languages of Emotion”); archaeology, ancient studies, and Earth sciences (in the excellence cluster “Topoi”); and area studies, history, and the social sciences (North American Studies, Islamic Studies, East Asian Studies). Each of the above-mentioned research clusters pools the academic skills and strengths of more than 20 disciplines represented at Freie Universität.

One particular area of emphasis in the university’s interdisciplinary research activities is its cooperation with scientific institutions not affiliated with the university (including four Max Planck Institutions) at the Dahlem campus. The university hosts six Collaborative Research Centers funded by the Germany Research Council (DFG) and is involved in 13 others.

Structures for Interdisciplinary Research

The core idea behind the university’s research planning is to encourage scholars and scientists from different disciplines and departments to work together on studying topics of particular social relevance. A series of focus areas form the working platform for these areas of emphasis in the research conducted at Freie Universität.

The structure and form of this type of interdisciplinary research network ranges from loosely organized platforms that offer opportunities to share ideas and provide support for the creation of new research projects (such as the Dahlem Humanities Center or the Center for Area Studies) to tightly-knit alliances working on grant proposals for Collaborative Research Centers or other major, long-term institutional grants. The success of the focus area approach is measured according to parameters such as support for junior scholars and scientists, publications, events, international visibility, and funds raised from external sources. The duration and life cycle of a

focus area depends on the scope of the issues being explored and the cooperative arrangements put in place to study them.

Current focus areas at Freie Universität Berlin:

- Center for Area Studies (CAS)
- Dahlem Center of Plant Sciences (DCPS)
- Dahlem Humanities Center (DHC)
- Disease in Human Aging: Dynamics at the Level of Molecules, Individuals, and Society (DynAge)
- Functional Materials at the Nanoscale (NanoScale)

Interdisciplinarity and Graduate Education

In the context of the German Federal Government's Excellence Initiative in 2007 and 2012, the Freie Universität Berlin was twice awarded the status of an excellent university, with three clusters of excellence, seven graduate schools and repeated awards for the university's institutional development concept of developing an "international network university".

Since graduate schools play a pivotal role in the development of internationally competitive centers of top research, the German national Excellence Initiative called on universities to submit draft plans for the development of major structured graduate programs. The selection criteria included the quality of the academic and scientific work done by the participating researchers, the suitability of the location for the academic program proposed as well as the feasibility of the plans for admission, academic training and criteria for supervising doctoral candidates.

Accompanying structures to promote autonomy early in researchers' careers such as support for career development and planning, international networks and visibility as well as quality assurance across the academic education process also played a significant role.

The Freie Universität Berlin established a central coordination and management unit for graduate education, the Dahlem Research School, which provides logistic support and specific courses in transferable skills for all member programs and at the same time serves as the central instrument for quality control in graduate education.

The following graduate schools at Freie Universität Berlin are funded through the Excellence Initiative:

- Graduate School of North American Studies
- Berlin Graduate School of Muslim Cultures and Societies
- Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School of Literary Studies
- Berlin Brandenburg School for Regenerative Therapies (BSRT)
- Berlin Mathematical School
- Berlin School of Integrative Oncology
- Graduate School of East Asian Studies

Example: Graduate School of East Asian Studies (GEAS)

As professor of Japanese Politics and Political Economy, I was leading the initiative for establishing the Graduate School of East Asian Studies and, since the founding of the Graduate School in 2012, I have been the Director of the Graduate School. With a grant of roughly six million Euros over a period of five years, the Graduate School of East Asian Studies trains up

to 15 doctoral candidates per year. Additional doctoral students with external funding may be accepted.

GEAS builds on existing strengths in East Asian and area studies at Freie Universität Berlin and excellent language training in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. GEAS considers itself a culturally and historically informed social science training program with a research focus on East Asia. GEAS brings together Principal Investigators (PIs) from East Asian Studies with scholars from the social sciences, business and economics, law, the humanities, history and anthropology, as well as experts from non-university partner institutions. Altogether, more than 20 faculty members are involved in training GEAS doctoral candidates.

GEAS resources are augmented by well established discipline-based graduate programs at Freie Universität Berlin and graduate training programs at its partner institutions. GEAS can build upon an extensive network of active cooperative relationships with the leading research universities in East Asia and the core East Asia-related research institutions worldwide as well as with German and East Asian governments and organizations.

The Graduate School of East Asian Studies (GEAS) has three basic goals: First, GEAS combines area studies research on East Asia with thorough, discipline-based methodological training and strong language and cultural competence. Its training program is interdisciplinary with special emphasis on historically and culturally informed social science inquiry. Second, GEAS focuses on East Asia as a region. Our training encourages doctoral candidates to look beyond their country of specialization--China, Japan, or Korea--and to view East Asia-related research in comparative regional and global perspective. Third, our training and research is organized around a central theme, the study of institutions, that we believe offers a wide range of opportunities to study empirically and analyze theoretically the patterns of modernity in East Asia, their commonalities and connectedness as well as their differences from other regions, while at the same time seeking to generate new theory on this empirical base.

The doctoral training program combines discipline-based methods courses, research seminars, and summer schools with mandatory periods of fieldwork in East Asia and the provision of specific area-related transferable skills. Doctoral candidates will receive degrees in the department of their discipline under the supervision of a team of three advisors and a faculty mentor in East Asia. Supervisory agreements stipulate the rights and duties of both the Ph.D. candidates and their faculty advisors and are meant to ensure in time completion of the Ph.D. thesis.

The research program is organized in relation to three interconnected lenses: the origins and change of institutions in East Asia, the effects of institutions and the consequences of institutional diversity, and the interdependence of East Asia in the broader regional and global context.