

Seven Year Review of the Pufendorf Institute for Advanced Studies at Lund University

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Background

The Pufendorf Institute was established in December 2008 to provide ‘an open, creative multi-disciplinary environment for researchers’ with the mission of identifying and studying ‘large scale present day and future problems.’ A loose alliance of eight major Advanced Study Institutes (ASIs) already existed around the globe, including the well known example at Princeton University (the first ASI founded in 1930) and Sweden’s own version at Uppsala University (Europe’s first ASI founded in 1985). Although all of these institutes incorporated projects spanning different research fields, the Pufendorf adopted interdisciplinarity as the defining component of its research mission. The motivation for doing so was clear. As Sweden’s largest university, Lund has nine faculties. According to the Vice-Chancellor at the time, the Pufendorf Institute would serve an important role in the University’s long term strategic plan by connecting academic staff from different disciplines who had limited opportunity for interaction within a traditional university structure. During our review, the current Assistant Vice-Chancellor (Sw. Vicerektor) emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary research at Lund University and the potential of the Pufendorf to initiate and strengthen this central activity.

The Pufendorf’s unique strategy among ASIs is based on a ‘bottom-up’ approach in which teams of Lund researchers annually submit interdisciplinary research topics for two schemes - Advanced Study Groups and Themes. Although the latter are larger (typically featuring 10-12 participants) and better funded (including contributions to participant salaries), both schemes target early stage, exploratory research. Reflecting the clear thirst of Lund researchers for interdisciplinary research, the number of Theme proposals has risen from an original two to three to the current 15, and the number of projects funded has increased consistently from two in 2010 to the proposed future equilibrium state of four Themes and four Advanced Study Group projects in 2016. The Pufendorf’s approach also differs from many of the other ASIs by not having permanent members and also in its relative intimacy. The 50-70 participating researchers compares to Princeton’s 190 annual members.

The Pufendorf can be applauded for developing a flexible and productive operational framework during its formative seven-year period. Our report here reviews the Institute’s unique approach within the context of Lund’s research environment. It identifies

ways in which it can build on this framework and extend its influence within the University and also internationally. We thank the members of the University community who participated in our visit for their warm hospitality and their open exchange of information and ideas.

Outputs

The rewards and challenges of interdisciplinary research have the capacity to increase with the number of team members from different disciplines, the academic 'distance' between the represented disciplines and the novelty of the research focus. The Pufendorf's Themes are driven by large teams from diverse disciplines studying early stage research. Consequently, they are ambitiously transgressive. They have the potential to generate truly innovative ideas that couldn't have been predicted and to have revolutionary impacts. To distinguish it from conventional projects that involve researchers from closely related disciplines, we term this form of research 'advanced interdisciplinarity'.

Advanced interdisciplinary research inevitably incurs high risks. Although some Themes will excel on levels well beyond what could have been achieved if the team members had worked separately, other Themes will underperform. Indeed, if all Themes succeed, this might indicate that the Pufendorf is playing too safe in its interdisciplinary scope. What is the desirable rate of success and how do we define the criteria of success? Given that interdisciplinary projects also require incubation for the innovative ideas to emerge, there is also the question of the relevant time frame for judging success. These questions apply equally to the Advanced Study Groups.

These are testing questions that reflect the inherently complex nature of advanced interdisciplinary research. Furthermore, the answers might vary from Theme to Theme. Nevertheless, we believe that the issue of evaluating interdisciplinary success is an important research problem in itself, one whose clarification would be of huge practical benefit for many institutes. Given its growing experience, the Pufendorf is in a unique position to address this issue and should aim to do so by the time of its tenth anniversary. We stress the importance of the research freedom currently provided by not requiring Themes to state their expected outcomes in advance. This should not be changed. However, future Themes should work closely with the Institute to figure out how they should be assessed as their research evolves. For the above reasons, we are not in a position to offer any sophisticated analysis of the research productivity of the Themes and Advanced Study Groups to date. However, we see no reasons for concern in terms of the publications generated. Furthermore, all of the earlier Themes (2009-13) have now secured subsequent funding.

The research results generated by the Themes and Advanced Study Groups represent one of three Pufendorf outputs. Another is its networking capacity. This has been spectacular. Of the 400 participants so far, surveys indicate that 84% have continuing contact with their colleagues and that two thirds of them collaborate at a high level either

on their original Theme or on new research topics. This networking is crucial to the University, as declared in the Vice-Chancellor's original intentions for the Institute in 2008.

The third output is that of training researchers in the art of advanced interdisciplinary practice. In their discussions with us and in survey responses, an overwhelming majority of researchers describe the work environment in very positive terms. With the completion of 13 Themes and 24 Advanced Study Groups, the Pufendorf is in an enviable position to reflect on the practicalities of conducting this high reward, high risk research with the aim of heightening the rewards and reducing the risks for future projects. We therefore recommend that the Pufendorf holds a workshop with previous participants to reflect upon positive and negative experiences. The sharing of common experiences might shed valuable light on issues such as team composition and size, communication methods, and diversity of research focus.

Looking Ahead

Taking full account of our assessment in the previous section, the remainder of this report will now focus primarily on a prospective rather than retrospective view of the Institute. What form might the Pufendorf of the future ideally take and how might it attain it? On the one hand, and as already noted, the Institute is in a position of strength based on its established way of working, relationship with the University and growing internal profile (as judged not least by the increasing number of thematic applications). On the other, there are (inevitably) challenges ahead and not least the matter of a future generational change in the Institute's leadership, the external profile of the Institute, and the possibility of an enhanced role for the Institute within the University.

In addition, the evaluators considered briefly the question of the funding model for the Institute. Our conclusion is that a direct allocation from the University (as currently operates) has important advantages over the obvious alternative of feeding back to the Institute a proportion of externally-generated grant income (for example, through allocating a share of the overhead). Our concern with the latter model was two-fold: it might create an unproductive competition with academic departments; it could also steer the Institute towards safer sources of revenue rather than taking a more open and high-risk/high gain approach to research. We propose at least a mid-term funding perspective and would specifically suggest a three-year allocation.

- The International/National Balance

One important issue within our forward look for the Institute concerns the balance of internal/external (or alternatively national/international) focus. A significant strength of the current focus on Lund University staff is that it builds a longer-term commitment into the Institute's activities – not least in the form of future networks and research activities after the period of funding. Lund is a large 'full-profile' university which provides a substantial academic foundation for such interdisciplinary activity – and also a motivation for engaging in specific 'bridging' activities of that type. However, there is the

danger that such research can become inward looking and lack a specific incentive to draw in internationally leading scholars. How could the Institute serve as an even more significant magnet to talented scholars world-wide?

Our suggestions here take a number of forms. One is that the Institute considers holding an earlier international workshop for each project rather than simply conducting this towards the project's conclusion. This would take shape as a 'formative' workshop where the 'local' team comes together with perhaps 2-3 international scholars in order to reflect upon the state of the art and build bridges with existing research outside Lund. These international scholars might then serve as 'mentors' to the project as it develops.

A second suggestion under this heading concerns the use of guest professors. Having reflected upon the practicalities of getting established scholars to be in residence for anything more than a limited period of time (not least due to competing family and professional responsibilities) and also the need to get the most out of such visitors, we would recommend the maximum flexibility in bringing international visitors to the Institute. One size does not need to fit all in this regard – with stays of as little as a week also bringing potential benefits. We are furthermore concerned that the timing of the application process for guest professors may be overly constricting: an application in April for a possible attendance as early as September in the same year, may preemptively rule out too many who might otherwise be interested because of commitments already entered into within their home institutions. Perhaps some thought therefore could be given to extending the lead-in period for applications.

Our attention has also been brought to the potentially anomic experience of the guest professors on arriving in Lund, who appear on occasion to have felt rather isolated, and who would sometimes have welcomed more guidance on their accountability both to their specific Theme, and to the Institute more generally. How many, and to what degree, will experience these kind of problems is no doubt a matter of personality, and many, we suspect, will not have felt any great lack. But the issue of the reception and integration of guest researchers is something to be borne in mind.

- *Raising the Profile*

A further issue for consideration relates to what we see as the possibilities for increasing especially the external profile of the Institute. Once again, a number of possibilities arise.

One suggestion is that the University makes full use of the Institute when recruiting academic staff. This could be a way of enhancing the University's distinctive interdisciplinary profile. More, too, might be made of the Institute's commitment to exciting and transgressive forms of interdisciplinary engagement: perhaps a series of public lectures on bridging the humanities-science divide, or on examples of the unique light such hybrid approaches can shed on topical issues? This relates to the Institute's on-line profile - which is also a matter for the University's profile. More consideration could be given to ensuring the Institute's visibility on the University's websites, and to the quality of the

Institute's own website which could helpfully be made more compelling in design, comprehensive, and user-friendly. Our judgement is that the Institute may in many ways be under-promoting itself and that more attention generally could be given to its public relations.

A third suggestion concerns the strategic use of the Institute as a spearhead for the University's interdisciplinary activities. There is no doubt that within the very short period of its existence, the Institute has become a valuable asset of the University and a significant register of the commitment at Lund to the promotion of pioneering and interdisciplinary research. In view of this, it seems important to consider how its future contribution to the life of the University might now evolve. We here offer some suggestions as to how the specific strengths of the Institute might be deployed both for furthering the work of the Institute itself, and for enhancing its role in the University.

The Institute functions as an exceptional laboratory for interdisciplinary experience and practice. Many comparable research centres recognize the importance of interdisciplinary scholarship in meeting the research challenges of the future, and are engaged in related activity. But it is very rare to find a centre, such as the Institute has become, where the participants have such a high level of commitment to resolving the many difficulties confronting the achievement of a genuinely interdisciplinary collaboration across such a wide range of subject areas. In the process of engaging with differences of concept, vocabulary and methodology, it is clear that many researchers have acquired a special knowledge of both the frictions and the often very considerable rewards of interdisciplinary cooperation. In view of this, we see the Institute as having built up a body of skill and experience that could helpfully be shared with researchers at all levels who are interested in interdisciplinary activity (or, indeed, be used to summon more enthusiasm for it among those who are resistant to it or skeptical about its value). In short, we see it as assuming a mentoring role for the University (to take the form, maybe, of short courses or workshops), and generally positioning itself as a centre of expertise on the quality, value and management of interdisciplinary work.

Further special strengths of the Institute relate to its 'bottom up' approach to the selection of research topics, the relative autonomy from other pressures that go with that, and the unique ethos and atmosphere enjoyed by its researchers (who clearly very much appreciate, not only the intellectual and physical support it offers, but also its openness to new and often quite experimental endeavours). Yet these exceptional aspects of the Institute's research are not always as well-known to the wider University community as they might be. In view of this, we suggest that Theme groups might be invited to put on some short courses relating to their Theme topic and activities for the benefit of PhD and/or Post Doc students working elsewhere in the University.

Together with its interdisciplinary commitments, the Institute also functions as an incubator of new ideas, and, in short, performs a doubly relevant role in terms of the University's overall mission. Indeed, it is clear that the Institute has from the outset viewed its potential offering in this light. (In its original application to the Wallenberg Foundation for financial support for the establishment of an 'Institute of Advanced Studies' it speaks of

this as providing ‘an important link in the long term strategic plan of Lund University’ and as contributing to the University’s role as a developer of the country’s intellectual level and knowledge). We suggest the Institute renew its commitment to this kind of thinking and adopt a larger advisory role as the University moves into the next stage of its strategic planning. In our meeting with the Assistant Vice-Chancellor (Sw.Vicerektor), we were given to believe that the adoption of a more pro-active stance in this respect would be helpful. There was also some suggestion that ideas initially ‘incubated’ at the Institute might be candidates for further development in new research centres, thus acting as catalysts for research development within the wider University community. There are opportunities here for the formation of a more interactive and mutually beneficial relationship: one in which the Institute becomes more involved in the shaping of the University-wide research culture and organization, and the University in turn provides more resources and opportunities for the Institute’s Advanced Study and Theme groups (or networks emerging from them) to deepen and extend research first given its momentum through the Institute.

In general, then, we would argue that more might be made of the Institute as a resource for future University-wide planning of interdisciplinary research. We did not sense that this need involve any major change in the Institute’s ways of working, nor seriously compromise on its autonomy and ethos. Nor are we advocating any significant change to its policy on topic selection – which is clearly such a popular and distinctive aspect of its operation. But as a means of raising profile and enhancing its ‘incubator’ role, we advise the Institute to consider its current procedures – for example, by allowing for more of a steer on one of its annual Themes by ear-marking it for a topic of particular relevance to the University’s research priorities and responsibilities. This is only one suggestion for a more hybrid model of topic guidance, and there are no doubt others that could evolve in the future and better serve the purpose.

In conclusion, we were impressed by the range and quality of the Pufendorf’s achievements in such a relatively short period of existence. This success owes much to the particular qualities of the Director, the Senior Scientific Advisor, the Chair of the Board and the team assembled around them.

Evaluators' Recommendations on the Pufendorf Institute for Advanced Studies

1. We recommend without hesitation that the Pufendorf Institute continue broadly on its present trajectory. The evaluators commend the Institute on its path-breaking role in fostering the development of advanced and highly original interdisciplinary research. We are impressed by what we have seen of the activities and outputs of the Institute. This is an ambitious and innovative initiative by Lund University which reflects extremely well on the institution as a whole.
2. We recommend that the University establish a longer planning horizon for the Institute's operation. As we understand it, funding to the Institute is currently allocated on an annual basis. Whilst the allocation has been relatively stable in historical terms, this annual process is in tension with the Pufendorf Institute's mission which is by definition longer-term and open in character. We propose at least a mid-term funding perspective and would specifically suggest a three-year allocation.
3. We recommend that the Institute takes further steps to enhance its internal and external profile. Specific suggestions here for consideration include improvement of the Institute's website, the preparation of publicity materials, 'outreach' work within the broader University community (and beyond), and the establishment of a lecture series on interdisciplinary themes (perhaps linked to topical concerns).
4. We recommend that the Institute should play a larger role as an interdisciplinary incubator for the University as a whole. One suggestion in this vein is that the Institute might initiate one or more pre-determined Themes alongside its more usual 'bottom-up' process. In practice, this would mean inviting interdisciplinary groups to give meaning and shape to a stated topic. A more hybrid approach to Theme selection would allow the Institute to link more directly to the strategic concerns of the University.
5. We recommend that the Institute should give greater attention both to the distinctiveness of its activities and to practical lessons concerning the process of 'making interdisciplinarity happen'. At a time when 'interdisciplinarity' is already embraced by many parts of the University (albeit in more restricted form), it is important to express more precisely the specific focus of the Institute – perhaps as 'advanced' or 'transgressive' forms of interdisciplinarity. In addition, we suggest a workshop which reflects on the experience built up over the Institute's existence concerning how best to organize interdisciplinarity.
6. We recognize that there are specific challenges in mapping the impact and consequences of this form of interdisciplinary endeavor – although we also note the very high level of activity with regard to external funding. We recommend that a project be initiated aimed at evaluating the research impact of the Institute. This is not simply a matter of counting publications, but should address the success criteria for the Institute and also the challenges of measurement. Given the large volume of

experience and evidence built up by the Institute since its inception, this could also be of service to the growing international community addressing questions of interdisciplinarity.

7. We paid particular attention within the evaluation visit to the appointment and duties of guest professors. In general, this is a strength of the Institute's operation. However, we recommend that further consideration be given to the issue of 'how to get the most from guest professors.' Our suggestions here range from allowing greater flexibility to individual Themes with regard to the duration of guest professorships to bringing the decision process forward so as to allow greater preparation time for visitors. We also raise the possibility of bringing external colleagues into an early stage Theme workshop so as to have a formative influence but also to create a mentorship network for project development.
8. We recommend that the activities of the Institute with regard to PhD/Post Doc training and involvement be enhanced and extended. One suggestion is an international course targeted at early career researchers as part of each Theme. This could enhance the standing of the Institute substantially but also extend the network of active researchers. The organization of an annual 'interdisciplinary retreat' for PhDs and/or Post Docs would also be advantageous.
9. It is noticeable that the Institute is now attracting an increasing number of applications for Themes and Advanced Study Groups. For this reason, and due to the increased demands on the transparency of peer review processes, we recommend that the Institute continue to review both the robustness and the developmental value of its decision-making processes. In terms of the latter, it is important that even rejection should be seen as an opportunity for learning and the strengthening of research.
10. We recommend that a clear policy be established within the Institute for the support of Theme leaders. Running an interdisciplinary group of this nature can be a demanding task – especially for a mid-career researcher. We suggest a defined process of mentoring and follow-up: perhaps commencing with an early meeting between the Institute director and the Theme leader. This could also assist with the creation of a mentoring network among current and previous Theme leaders.