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Article

Joint Research as an Innovation Strategy

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Joint Research as an Innovation Strategy¹



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The political and social questions of our time – the euro crisis, Brexit, the refugee crisis and transatlantic relations – can all be addressed with joint efforts. Indeed, there is nothing optional about the ‘joint’ in this context. Our political and social issues call for interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral cooperation. With all the jitteriness around and in times of growing populism – which is perhaps sometimes a little ‘conjured up’ – we need a diverse range of scientific expertise, as well as clear analyses.

The ifo Institute has been looking at such issues and finding answers to them for years – and offering its findings to a far wider public than a narrow circle of scientific experts. Today ifo’s annual meeting offers us the opportunity to reflect on how scientific research is organised, especially in terms of cooperative formats, to generate innovative solutions at ifo, in the 90 other institutes of the Leibniz Association and in scientific contexts in general, including those that are not primarily scientific.

The great economist and innovation theoretician Joseph Schumpeter sees innovation as ‘the result of creative destruction’. I would perhaps prefer to call it ‘creative disruption’ or ‘irritation’, but the break with conventional certainties, rigid disciplinary boundaries and the openness to social debates effectively also drive innovation in the field of science.

I am convinced that this driver is particularly powerful if research is carried out within teams and by representatives of various disciplines. The ifo Institute and the Leibniz Association on the whole are excellent proof of this fact. A research institute is essentially composed of people, and innovation can only fully develop in a climate in which staff members feel valued, happy to work together and are given enough scope for individual creativity. Joint research, team work and international networking are a matter of course for our young scientists.

As an association, Leibniz supports cooperative research with various offerings and in different forms that help – to return to the start of my speech – to creatively disrupt/destroy and ‘irritate’ in order to promote innovation. The Leibniz research alliances, and there are now twelve in total, have become a success

model of cooperative science. They ‘disregard’ the often outdated borders between individual disciplines in a productive and topic-oriented way; while drawing on the diversity of opinions available within the Leibniz Association and beyond, as a creative starting point. In terms of their subject matter these alliances range from health technologies and biodiversity to education potential or the topic of healthy ageing.

Complex social challenges are considered from different perspectives, like, for example, in the Leibniz research alliance ‘Crises in a Globalised World’: how do crises arise and how can they be tackled?’ This is the question raised by the alliance of twenty-two Leibniz institutes, including ifo, as well as by institutes that only do research into marine tropical regions, for example, or into agricultural issues like the cultivation of vegetables and ornamental plants lie. Together these institutes look at financial market and debt crises, food and environmental crises, as well as those of a political nature. They thus gain insights into how crises are linked, how they arise in different fields, how they progress and how they can be tackled.

In this respect this form of cooperation aimed at solving concrete problems makes it possible to overcome the rigid barriers between disciplines. The basis for this innovative, inter-disciplinary approach is the outstanding scientific competence of individual institutes. Thanks to the fact that it crosses borders, cooperative research also has the potential to call into question old certainties in order to find new solutions under changed framework conditions. A good example of a field requiring such an approach is digitalisation, which spans both technical and social innovations.

The Leibniz Association institutions have focused on digitalisation in recent years by examining both its technical and its social and economic phenomena and side-effects across a whole range of disciplines. ‘Exploiting, shaping and researching the digital transformation’ is our motto. In the health sector Leibniz research alliance, for instance, performs research into how lengthy therapies can be simplified through tele-medicine technologies. Leibniz institutes look at the implications of digitalisation processes in manufacturing for the world of work and on agriculture.

This topic is also a key focus area for Leibniz education research, which observes the effects of digitalisation on education and individual education paths, leading to success stories like the Global Learning Council Summit 2017, which was organised in Europe for the first time this year by the Leibniz Association. Digitalisation has also wrought many changes in research processes themselves: the Science 2.0 Leibniz research alliance looks at its implications for the publication process and scientific communication.

It is the thematic diversity and competence in various disciplines that makes cooperative research so exciting to us at the Leibniz Association. It enables us to examine complex phenomena like digitalisation from different perspectives. In June 2017 the Leibniz College:

¹ This article is an English translation of the introductory speech given by Matthias Kleiner, President of the Leibniz Association, at the 68th Annual General Meeting of the ifo Institute, which was held in Munich on 28 June 2017.

‘Digitisation in the Research System’ took place, a new concept launched by the Leibniz Association that enables post-docs from all Leibniz institutes to discuss different topics and network. In short, promoting dialogue and enabling cooperative research is a key priority for the Leibniz Association. This is because, in addition to the diversity of perspectives arising from the different disciplines involved, the creative friction between the ideas generated by cooperation drives innovation too.

This creative and constructive friction between ideas also characterises the relationships between the six leading German economics institutes that come under the umbrella of the Leibniz Association. The bi-annual Joint Economic Forecast conducted by ifo in conjunction with four other Leibniz economics research institutes - and whose very quality is ensured by the merging of different strategies - shows how productive this approach can be. There is strong demand for such insights from politics. This is another keyword for creative border crossing in the context of cooperative research, as the findings of our economics research institutes in particular are highly relevant both in social and political terms. Transferring these insights and policy advisory work are crucial tasks of major importance to the Leibniz Association, not least because all dialogue gives rise to new and innovative ideas.

Finally, our dialogue with partners at universities is also very important, with cooperation between individuals at universities and Leibniz institutes also pointing to research across institutional borders. We now run 19 Leibniz *WissenschaftsCampi* (science campuses) that link up regional universities and Leibniz institutes; and enable long-term and strategic cooperation between Leibniz institutes and universities (as well as non-academic partners in some cases) as equals.

In view of the complexity of current social and political challenges, I see the cooperative research mode as a core innovative strategy for the future. ‘Germany as a science and innovation base’ marks a further step along this path and aims to strengthen cooperative research. I am sure that the Leibniz Association and institutes like ifo will contribute to consolidating Germany’s position.