Blended Learning in (fr)agile Contexts

A handbook of program design practices

Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung

DAAD

Freie Universität Berlin

INTELLECTUAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE ISLAMICATE WORLD

Table of Contents

About this Handbook

Dear readers and practitioners,

The digitization of higher education is one of the most significant issues that academia is concerned with today. When it comes to blended learning, the manifold opportunities offered by the combination of e-learning and classroom teaching are promising. This methodologically hybrid approach has been successfully implemented in the DAAD-funded master program *Intellectual Encounters of the Islamicate World* (IEIW) at the Freie Universität Berlin.

Back in 2013, when DAAD started to fund this pilot project by means of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), expectations were markedly high. I am proud that our expectations have even been exceeded. The result of this support is an excellently elaborated blended learning concept regarding the adequate use of technology, content, didactics, and organization. Therefore, the project has yielded essential learning points that are extremely useful for the implementation of similar study programs at universities. Just to mention one point, for instance: The project team early on identified the hurdle to clear was not necessarily the technical infrastructure, but developing appropriate digital didactics. To put this in other words, it does matter if learning and teaching is organized with or without ICT.

Lars Gerold

The key learning points of IEIW's blended learning design are documented in this digital handbook. It tells the story of developing the concept in all its facets and reveals that the study program sometimes had to go its own way in terms of implementation. This handbook is a valuable source of good practices and provides suggestions to readers and universities on how to build and implement a sound blended learning concept.

I would like to thank the project team of the FU Berlin, the graphic artist, and the author for all their efforts to compile and produce this handbook. I hope all readers will learn from the FU´s experience and can draw their own conclusions for their own projects.

Sincerely yours,
Lars Gerold

DAAD, Head of Section, Development Cooperation - Institution Building in Higher Education

Preface

In 2013, Freie Universität Berlin established the Master of Arts program "Intellectual Encounters of the Islamicate World" – an English-language, blended learning degree program targeted at participants from the Middle East. With its "International Network University" strategy, Freie Universität Berlin is a natural host to this program, which is taught by leading international experts on the many interconnections between Jewish, Christian and Muslim thinkers in the Arab-spoken medieval period.

Freie Universität Berlin was founded by students and scholars in 1948. Sparked by the persecution faced by students at the former Universität Unter den Linden, at the time located in the Soviet sector of the divided city, international support and networks were crucial from its founding moment. The principles of freedom and internationality have guided the university's development ever since. Extensive exchanges of scholars, students and administrative staff as well as cooperation agreements with universities all over the world remain hallmarks of the international character of Freie Universität to this day. In the framework of its international strategy, Freie Universität maintains a worldwide network of liaison offices, which support the university's researchers in reaching out internationally, increase the university's visibility in the respective regions, and help recruit outstanding young researchers. In addition, the university has established strategic partnerships with leading research universities worldwide, allowing for comprehensive networking and cooperation on all university levels.

The interdisciplinary setup of the degree program, which combines the multifaceted insights of Islamic, Jewish and Christian Oriental Studies on a shared subject, is innovative and allows for new perspectives. Providing joint access to higher education for Afghan, Dutch, German, Indonesian, Iranian, Israeli, Palestinian, Syrian, and Turkish students and many more, and doing so by choosing virtual learning tools, epitomizes an intellectual encounter in the true sense of the word. The study of the many interconnections in the intellectual history of the three monotheistic religions creates a space for an open exchange of ideas and a search for intellectual commonality – independent of external, but often prevalent conditions of political conflict or religious divide.

The MA Intellectual Encounters has provided valuable insights into the possibilities of digital teaching in the 21st century. We hope that this publication will provide professors, lecturers and practitioners with background information on the underlying concepts and methods of the program. The Executive Board of Freie Universität Berlin highly appreciates the financial support of the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development and the close cooperation with the German Academic Exchange Service in realizing this project.

Sincerely yours,
Professor Dr. Verena Blechinger-Talcott

Vice-President International of the Freie Universität Berlin

Professor Dr. Verena Blechinger-Talcott

Introductory remarks

Dear reader,

The history of the Master of Arts program "Intellectual Encounters of the Islamicate World" started in the early 2000s, when the Yad Hanadiv Foundation encouraged two of us – Sarah Stroumsa and Sari Nusseibeh – to come up with a project that would combine our fields of expertise, and that, by using modern technologies, would reach across political, religious, and disciplinary borders. Our point of departure was the common Arabic culture of the medieval Islamicate world, where Muslim, Christian and Jewish thinkers wrote in Arabic, polemicizing and at the same time exchanging philosophical and scientific knowledge with each other. We began by establishing a website that attempted to recreate the interconfessional scene of the medieval intellectual world. By providing materials from major thinkers of the three denominations, we hoped to encourage readers and students to discover interconnections between those thinkers.

In 2011, this website served as a platform for teaching students from the USA, Israel, Palestinian territories, and Germany, who subsequently met in a workshop in Marrakesh, generously funded by the Hermès Foundation. With Sabine Schmidtke, who had her own project on the "History of the Islamicate World" at the Freie Universität Berlin, we then thought of turning the modest success of the workshop into a full, stable, cutting-edge teaching program. The idea was to bring together Israeli, Palestinian and German students in a one-year, interdisciplinary MA program. Using modern techniques of online teaching, the program would, we hoped, overcome the many political and economic obstacles that real life imposed on these students.

Six years after its establishment at the Freie Universität Berlin, the program boasts 72 alumni, with an additional 19 students in the present cohort. Our graduates come from Israel, and Palestinian terrotories, and from Germany – but also from Turkey, Egypt, Lebanon, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Syria, Peru, Iran, Afghanistan, the Netherlands, and the USA. The program has given them the opportunity to study their common intellectual past together, despite geographical obstacles and cultural differences.

For the three of us, the program turned out to be a gratifying, at times very moving, learning experience. We wish to express our deep gratitude for the support of the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) as well as for the generous funding from the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development, the Rothschild Foundation Jerusalem, an anonymous private donor, and the Frank Reinhard-Stiftung. We thank the Freie Universität Berlin, which rose up to the challenge of managing such an unusual program, requiring special arrangements and coordination. We are also thankful to the teachers of this program – internationally renowned scholars who have shared their expertise and academic passion with much spirit and dedication. An international degree program such as the MA Intellectual Encounters also depends on the support of political institutions, such as the German Foreign Ministry and the German Representative's Office in Ramallah, whose proficient guidance has constituted an essential component in its success. Last, but not least, we wish to extend our heartfelt thanks to the Israeli and Palestinian tutors, to the organization team in Berlin, and to the many people who have been working tirelessly behind the scenes to make things happen.

We hope that this guide will be helpful for those who choose to enter equally new and promising terrains of academic cooperation and intercultural interaction through virtual teaching.

Professor Dr. Sabine Schmidtke,
Institute of Advanced Study, Princeton

Professor Sarah Stroumsa,
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem

Professor Sari Nusseibeh,
Al-Quds University, Jerusalem

Professor Dr. Sabine Schmidtke

Professor Sarah Stroumsa

Professor Sari Nusseibeh

Overview, goals and audiences

The creation of the master program "Intellectual Encounters of the Islamicate World" (IEIW) at the Freie Universität Berlin (FUB) was a shared initiative of stakeholders for the internationalization of higher education and development in Germany to pilot an online degree. Growing awareness of the crucial role that access to higher education and advanced professional training play for economic development in the Middle East culminated in the launch of this project by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), with funding made available by the Federal Ministry for International Cooperation and Economic Development (BMZ). An online master program bringing Israeli and Palestinian students together in the study of their shared religious history was expected to foster capacities for intercultural dialogue in future professionals and to broaden access to advanced graduate degrees for marginalized groups.

Between 2013 and 2019, this multi-stakeholder intervention had to balance a complex set of higher education, development, and political goals. Operating within the fairly rigid legal and organizational framework of a German university, the project team succeeded in overcoming expected and unexpected challenges while relying on limited resources. The shape they gave to the resulting project displays a number of unique characteristics, unforeseen and unplanned at launch time. For the academic component of instruction and assessment, the team developed innovative blended-learning approaches and instructional formats. Likewise, the project saw the emergence of effective administrative workflows and suitable strategies for flexible project management.

By publishing a condensed account in this handbook during the final iteration of the original funding period, six years after its effective launch and steady implementation of the IEIW MA program, we are attempting to capture lessons that may be taken away from this pilot project. The sections of this report should be read as disaggregated findings. When viewed together and after the pieces of this jigsaw puzzle fall into their respective places, the sections reveal the impact that separate design decisions and overlapping agendas had on the overall program design. The accompanying infographics provide a visualization of the multiple relationships and interfaces to aid the integration of the individual elements of the project into project timelines, organizational structure, stakeholder expectations and educational outcomes.

The account of creating and implementing the IEIW MA program over its seven-year duration cannot be fully captured by an examination of learning outcomes, graduation rates and alumni employment trajectories alone. Various internal reports and external evaluations have thoroughly documented such quantifiable indicators for reporting to funding agencies as fully met. At the time of this writing, a total of 72 students have successfully graduated with a master's degree since 2013, and another 19 participants are about to follow suit in the current academic year. Some have been able to leverage their studies into professional careers, others are continuing in academic programs for a PhD, still others are looking for steady employment. Their advanced degree in intercultural studies is, in any case, an asset for career advancement in their home regions and beyond.

Gauging the systemic impact of educational interventions or their long-term effectiveness remains difficult. From a development perspective, higher education is best considered as a societal investment, whose returns are long-term, qualitative and indeterminate. Numerous environmental factors determine success and sustainability independent of individual learning outcomes or the program's academic reputation for excellence. Since the launch of the IEIW program in 2013, the political climate in the Middle East, for example, has taken a drastic turn towards more adversarial positions. Project performance on various levels was negatively impacted by the increase in hostility, the most significant of which was the early revelation in 2014 that it would be impossible for Palestinian institutions to formally participate in the trilateral partnership as originally foreseen. Somewhat ironically, the growing polarization in the region has brought increased engagement with intercultural dialogue in some organizations, increasing employment opportunities for some program alumni. While this unexpected development is creating a positive data point for quantitative evaluations of post-graduation employment rates, it clearly perverts the original spirit of the intervention.

To avoid redundancy with existing project documentation and to complement the previous evaluations, this publication attempts to capture key aspects of the project design processes in order to make them available to a broader audience for discussion and reflection. Drawing on numerous aspects of administration, multiple stakeholder perspectives and occasional anecdotes of the project history as recounted by various participants, these pages contain a concise, ex-post interpretation of crucial milestones factoring in the project's success. Although they are intimately connected and mutually constitutive in reality, they have been separated here analytically.

One half of this handbook illuminates strategies for the design of an academic format geared to skills-training in transdisciplinary research and intercultural dialogue, viewed from learning and instruction perspectives. The ultimate form of the program's educational design was influenced strongly by the cognitive skills defined as successful learning outcomes and by the blended learning technologies available at the time. The insights captured

here may prove useful to developers of technology-enhanced learning arrangements that are expected to offer a composite of cognitive skills, both disciplinary and general, suitable for graduate or post-graduate students of higher education.

The other half of this handbook takes an administrative perspective to describe salient aspects of project design. The work of organizing and governing an interdisciplinary distance-learning program for students from the Middle East must address the contiguities of socio-politically fragile contexts. Strongly shaped by concrete political and cultural tensions, a key requirement for the project's functionality was its strategic compatibility with the higher education landscape in Germany and operational compliance with its host university in Berlin. It may therefore yield reference points for practitioners negotiating the challenges entailed in bridging similarly fragile contexts within a more structurally robust educational environment.

Stakeholder cooperation of the kind described within this report has moved out of the exploratory stage, growing into a more common strategic approach to the nexus of higher education and development. While this handbook has a strong practical bent, it also identifies some general principles for such endeavors and suitable indicators for success in this context. Both the dynamics of fragile contexts and technological innovation cycles defy any notion of permanence, so a collection of experiential insights might prove helpful for practitioners and decision-makers in higher education, including innovators, oversight bodies, evaluators and funders.

The intended audience of this publication has implications for its terminology and style. While current research in intercultural distance education or Middle Eastern development is occasionally referenced, this study draws overwhelmingly on the accumulated expertise of practitioners and available project documentation. We have sought to keep references to the vast body of literature relevant to the subject to the absolute minimum helpful for further reading in order to maintain focus on practical application. The account presented is based on project documentation, various workshops and interviews with members of the project team and other stakeholders, primarily in the summer and fall of 2018. It is fueled by their enthusiasm and dedication for an experimental venture which, in light of the myriad obstacles in its path, could have easily failed. Funders, students, and administrators alike willingly accepted the associated uncertainties. One key undertaking in the trajectory and the accomplishments of the overall project involved carefully calculating and balancing the inevitable risks.

The IEIW program's subject matter — philosophical and intellectual history in the Arabic-speaking societies of the Middle Ages — inevitably infuses the overall project narrative just as much as the conflictual political context of the contemporary Middle East. From this setting flows a choice in terminology taken in the interest of easier accessibility for the reader. Unless noted otherwise, the term "intercultural" is used here to explicitly include the crossing of both *international* and *interreligious* borders. To clarify, this terminology does not equate a religion and/or nation with a particular religious or national culture, which is a common fallacy in politically charged discourses regarding the Middle East conflict. Instead, the terminology signals a broad understanding of "culture" as the amalgamation of cultural practices, including religious practices, as shaped by the institutions of a nation state and state-like entities. Together, social practices and institutional structures inform both the personal identity of an individual and limit the overall set of expectations that shape her communicative actions. The basic assumption behind the IEIW program that drove its methodological and pedagogical design was the conceptualization of these social practices on a continuous scale with gradual differences, and not as distinct categories with clearly demarcated boundaries to overcome.

Such intercultural challenges of distance education are surely more pronounced and require more sensitive solutions in the conflictual setting of the Middle East. They may be harder to discern in other circumstances, but in situations where technologically mediated learning can bridge educational systems and cultural traditions, they are no less relevant to communicative practices. The terminology serves a second purpose in that it underlines how observations and strategies emanating from the project described here are relevant beyond its subject matter and geographic focus. Bound up with these challenges as they are, they are not intended as best practices to replicate, but may be transposed into structurally similar situations to mark fault lines more clearly and to improve orientation for all stakeholders involved.

Scope and structure

From their beginnings, projects such as the IEIW MA face a dual task. On the surface, they are charged with the development of suitable formats for a program of academic study. This is a familiar enough undertaking for an educational design challenge. In basic terms of project management, this requires the production of an interdisciplinary curriculum with corresponding assessment formats, whose academic and professional relevance offers value for participants recruited from various educational backgrounds.

If technological innovations such as blended learning are part of the initial list of requirements, early decisions about the role and function of e-learning within the program are crucial so as to enable program access and distance learning in fragile contexts with the help of digital technologies. Pedagogical innovation and, where necessary, an experimental approach to instructional design, complete the list of conditions needed to address the development goals underpinning the higher education agenda and the expected socio-political and economic instability in the target region.

Yet project parameters do not grant the entrepreneurial freedoms of a start-up venture for meeting these complicated demands. As an organizational unit within the research department of a degree-granting university, compatibility with established administrative processes and the material infrastructure of the surrounding organization remains imperative throughout. A second design challenge therefore concerns the sub-structures of project management and the development of suitable workflows for internal administration while providing transparency for external governance.

This handbook complements the evaluation of project outcomes by describing processes and insights that shaped these two designs: a technology-supported learning arrangement and its administrative foundations. The heuristic principle used to structure this study attempts to balance practical usefulness with conceptual clarity. This principle is described in this section in some detail, not only because it will help the reader navigate the report. The conceptual structure presented here is one of the salient insights gathered from the IEIW project, and it may therefore prove useful in the future as an analytical lens for the investigation of endeavors with similar aims.

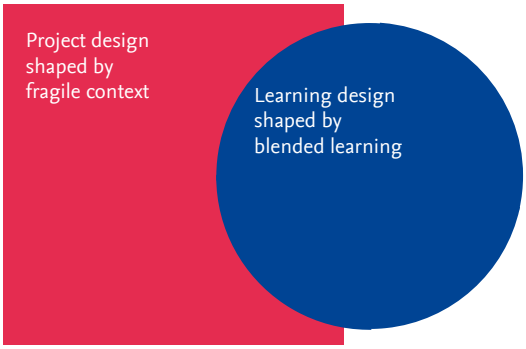

Figure 1. A blended learning format for fragile contexts consists of two design tasks.

On the face of it, the learning design challenge is a typical example for the use of educational technology in extending the availability of higher education into fragile contexts. Blended learning was conceived by the IEIW founders as supporting activities in unfamiliar political, cultural and social constellations and in unfamiliar pedagogical territory, all of which would become accessible by means of distance learning. It should be noted that this premise did not regard the use of technology-supported learning as a replacement (or, indeed, a cost reduction) for conventional formats of academic learning. Instead, a set of digital tools were to be selected and tested for expanding the effective reach of quality post-graduate teaching formats and the preparation of corresponding cognitive skills in students. The emergent *learning design* encompasses interlocking instructional formats and assessment strategies. Its description illuminates success factors for pedagogical aspects of blended learning solutions that are not limited in application to fragile contexts.

For such an exploratory foray into a fragile political context to succeed, numerous demands from partners and participants in the target region had to be translated into processes that were compatible with the landscape of German higher education. The project team therefore needed to continuously examine, consider and adjust its own administrative and academic practices, so as to provide a locus of stability for all involved stakeholders in light of a constantly changing environment. Destabilizing factors beyond the team's control included political conflicts in the Middle East, unsteady sources of funding, growing bureaucratic demands for compliance, contractual changes and staff fluctuation, to name only the most salient ones.

Technological innovation plays a subordinate role at best in this part of the design process, which is best understood as a challenge in *project design*. The key hurdles to be solved here, in other words, are independent of the digital learning components of the program. They would have required solutions all the same for an on-site program without such an online component, because the decisions are relevant to effectively and efficiently bridging two educational contexts with different degrees of robustness.

Inputs and outputs on both sides of institutional and cultural gaps must be made to match with maximum possible efficiency under conditions of high uncertainty.

Accordingly, the resulting *project design* is traced separately from the *learning design* (see Figure 1), as a complex bundle of communication practices that serve to translate, negotiate, buffer and sometimes intentionally obscure the contradictions between these two contexts. For the overall project strategy to succeed, the goals specified in stakeholder agendas must be operationalized within the existing frameworks of higher education both in Germany and the Middle East. Their combined formal and informal practices both enable and constrain the available space of action.

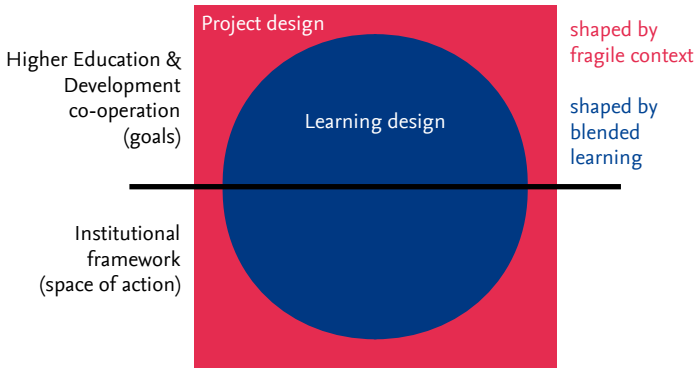

Figure 2. Both designs must conform to stakeholder agendas and operate within given institutional frameworks.

Requirements for both learning and project designs typically include external criteria and constraints that can be grouped onto two separate planes. In Germany, an ongoing federal-level strategy seeks to integrate efforts of higher education stakeholders and international development agencies for sustainable regional interventions. This cooperation was fundamental to IEIW funding and imbued the project with separate agendas promulgated by two different sets of stakeholders. The program was to transmit to students a combination of specialized disciplinary knowledge, that is to say, the basics of high quality academic research, and the generalized cognitive skills of a state-of-the-art graduate program to help increase the employability of alumni by qualifying them professionally for the nonacademic labor market.

The host organization for the IEIW program is a large research university with extensive internationalization experience, in order to provide academic supervision and the necessary infrastructure. The funding agencies charged with project supervision and the university research unit, on whose subject matter expertise the grant proposal relies, typically have neither the mandate, the capacities for the operational management of a degree program, nor the ability to award students a graduate degree at its completion. Therefore the natural implementation structure is a suitable departmental entity at a degree-granting institution, generally associated with a disciplinary chair. Implicit in this hosting structure is the compatibility of the project design with the procedures and configurationsof the educational system and the surrounding university structures, which are not especially conducive to even less-than-radical innovations due to their institutionalized organizations and procedures.

In order to have any chance of success, the project must carve out its own space of action to maneuver within the existing expectations of the institutional framework and the organizational arrangement of the project's environment (see Figure 2). As an internal unit of the overall organization, it is subject to the densely regulated framework, compliance codes and institutionalized expectations of the higher education landscape. As a designated test bed for innovation, the project may claim a certain degree of leeway. Project managers must actively attempt to exempt innovation and experiments from some of the university's standard routines and the educational system's institutionalized rules. Yet inherent structural tensions between the imperatives of innovation and compliance constrain the available space of action and shape the resulting designs.

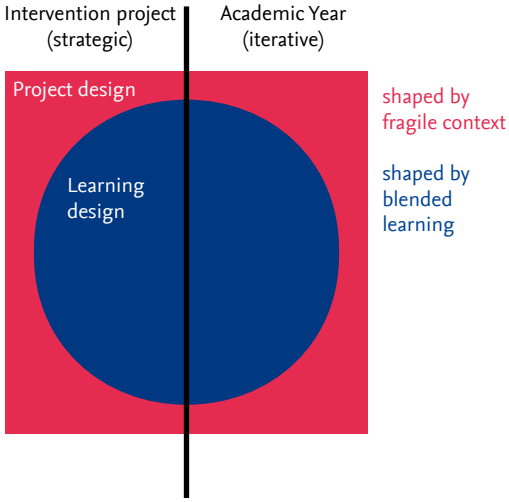

Figure 3. Academic program iterations generate data for the strategic optimization of learning practices and project structures.

A second analytical distinction between the learning design and project design concerns time horizons. Launching the initial pilot iteration of a study program in a relatively short time necessitates a number of decisions that are largely based on assumptions. Even before the pilot is completed, experiences with the first cohort of instructors and students generate data points to adapt and improve design. Future iterations of the program, implemented here over the lifetime of the project from 2013 to 2019, have each been able to draw on a growing set of empirical findings.

Refining and adapting a learning design through multiple iteration cycles is typical for educational formats. Experienced instructors are able to facilitate learning with consideration of the actual students in the program by drawing

on a set of available instructional theories. In the case of the IEIW Master Degree, however, both faculty and students were recruited anew for every single cycle, in order to involve a broad set of interdisciplinary specialists. For this reason, iterative learnings and improvements could not be captured, documented and applied by faculty, but such tasks were assumed by the project team instead. We must therefore distinguish analytically between the team's role in operational support during each 12-month cycle of the degree program and its attention to maintaining and adjusting overall project strategy and formats.

The usefulness of distinguishing strategic and iterative perspectives is not limited to the learning design. It similarly applies to the design of project management and administration. The diversity of backgrounds of students from fragile contexts by definition results in an administrative overhead, from enrolment to graduation, which defies standardization into bureaucratic routines. This challenge is rooted not so much in the unique student biographies – although these are a contributing factor – but in their general lack of familiarity with the formal rules and informal practices of attending a German university, albeit from a distance. Students in an on-site program are able to acquire this understanding during their first weeks and months of interaction on campus. Students from fragile contexts in an international distance learning program must bridge, not only geographic space, but substantial cultural gaps for the same learning outcomes, which are often further impeded by a language barrier. The same thing is true from the perspective of the host university, its structures, practices and staff. Regular study programs assume on-site teaching and learning, targeting students and instructors assumed to be fluent in German. The administrative framework for such a university's academic programs, whether analogue or digital, involve documents, forms and interactions in German and presuppose (often implicitly) an understanding of the socio-cultural traditions surrounding and shaping the organization.

Once again, the operational tasks for the administration of each IEIW program cycle are complemented by a strategic perspective to optimize such workflows into more efficient routines over time as part of the project design (see Figure 3). The shift between the temporal arcs of operational management for each iteration of the program and organizational development over the project lifetime is inevitably shaped, not by the subject matter to be studied nor the blended mode of instruction, but primarily by characteristics of the two fundamentally different educational systems involved.

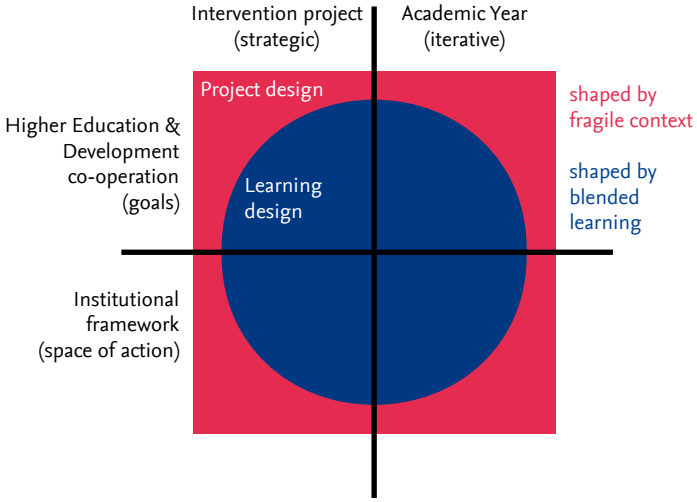

Figure 4. The analytical lens comprises four distinct perspectives on two separate design tasks.

The structure of this handbook therefore combines the two-tiered design missions entailed in the project in the analytical structure depicted in Figure 4 above. Each of the main project outcomes, a suitable learning design enriched by multiple iterations and a compliant project design for innovative reach into fragile contexts, is horizontally divided along the two dimensions of defined **project goals** and actual **action space** (x-axis). The vertical line distinguishes the **strategic project perspective** from the operational concerns for each academic cycle of **program iterations** (y-axis). The two workstreams of the IEIW Master project are thus analytically split into four sections for the **learning design** and four sections for the **project design**, a distinction that may be fruitfully applied to similar undertakings.

Format and user guide

Much like the project it describes, this publication is also the result of the design process, albeit a much simpler one. The layers of complexity folded into the IEIW experience have been condensed by editorial decision into a format that does not presuppose expert advance knowledge in either medieval religious history, contemporary Middle East politics, or online didactics and blended learning. An at least cursory understanding of the German higher education system and development policies might prove helpful, however, to contextualize the narrative.

As befits a publication on technology-supported learning, the handbook is published in a hybrid format as a digital e-book along with a small edition print run in conventional paper format. The eight sections of the handbook that comprise its analytical narrative are closely linked as a sequence of stand-alone chapters to provide maximum usefulness in both formats. At the same time, it is purposely structured in a modular fashion, so as to allow for a more flexible reading experience, adjustable to differing audiences and contexts. A reader can thus use the publication as a reference and pick the individual chapter that she considers most relevant to her interests.

Section 1 emphasizes the *overlap in strategic goals* that brought graduate studies of medieval history together with emergent educational technologies to a Middle East development project.

Section 2 examines the strategic project phases of *conceiving, implementing and consolidating the learning design* from 2012 to 2019, with an emphasis on the varied set of goals the project was expected to achieve.

Section 3 describes the *instructional formats* of the academic program, which were developed to support the students' acquisition of both disciplinary and general cognitive skills within a technology-enhanced learning environment, with a focus on tools and strategies for intercultural communication.

Section 4 traces the hypotheses driving the development of the *pilot iteration*, when uncertainty was highest, and later adjustments for the program's *steady state* as driven by empirical learning experiences.

Section 5 contrasts the project's institutional backbone of external funders and the expectations of Middle Eastern partners with the *unfamiliar organizational framework* confronting participating faculty and students in the context of a German university.

Section 6 maps the *student learning journey* through the degree program with landmarks for acquiring and practicing various kinds of cognitive skills strategically specified as learning outcomes for the project.

Section 7 highlights various *administrative work-streams* for the successful completion of each academic cycle, along with their respective degrees of freedom regarding innovation and compliance.

Section 8 surveys *governance and quality assurance* on the operational level, highlighting key strategies of translation and buffering among different governance mechanisms and incentive structures.

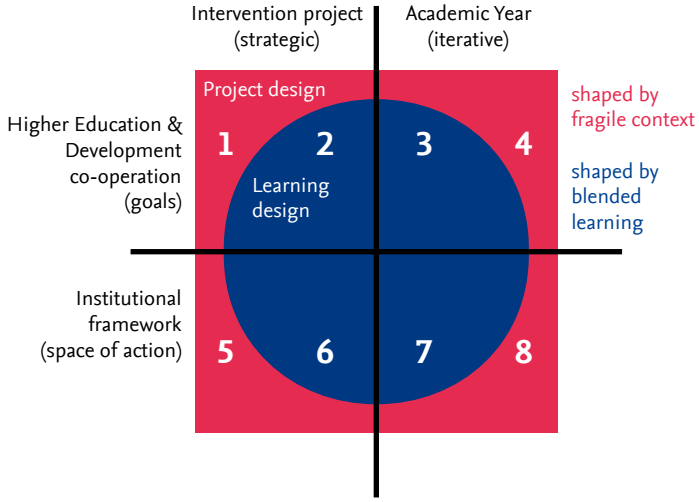

Figure 5. Numbered chapters of this handbook (Sections 1-8) correspond to different analytical perspectives.

We invite the reader to peruse the publication as a unified narrative to be read in sequence. This approach will take her on a journey along the horizontal axes of the diagram, first examining trade-offs between educational and development goals (Sections 1-2-3-4), then moving on to opportunities and constraints imposed by real-world organization frameworks (Sections 5-6-7-8).

As illustrated in Figure 5 above, the modular structure facilitates a number of approaches to reading other than the conventional sequence, especially in the digital format. One can depart on an alternative route to the ordinal sequence by following a clockwise rotation through the diagram from Section 1 to Section 8, covering both learning and project design, but now framing operational aspects within strategic brackets (1-2-3-4, 8-7-6-5). Alternatively, the reader may wish to dive into the contrast between learning design and project design from the perspective of **goals** (Sections 1-4-2-3), **institutional frameworks** (5-8-6-7), overall **project strategy** (1-5-2-6) and **iterations of the academic program** (4-8-3-7) respectively.

To read about the learning design, follow the circle segments clockwise (2-3-7-6), then read about project design following an analogous clockwise route through the section of the rectangle (1-4-8-5). Finally, one may choose to follow the structure along its vertical axes to read first about different aspects of **strategic intervention** (1-2-5-6), followed by the operational perspective of the program iterations over six academic cycles (3-4-7-8).

A second benefit of digital publishing is the ease with which we are able to adjust and enhance this publication for optimal use. If you have feedback or suggestions for improvement, clarification or corrections, please do not hesitate to reach out as we would love to hear from you.

1. Higher education and development in fragile contexts

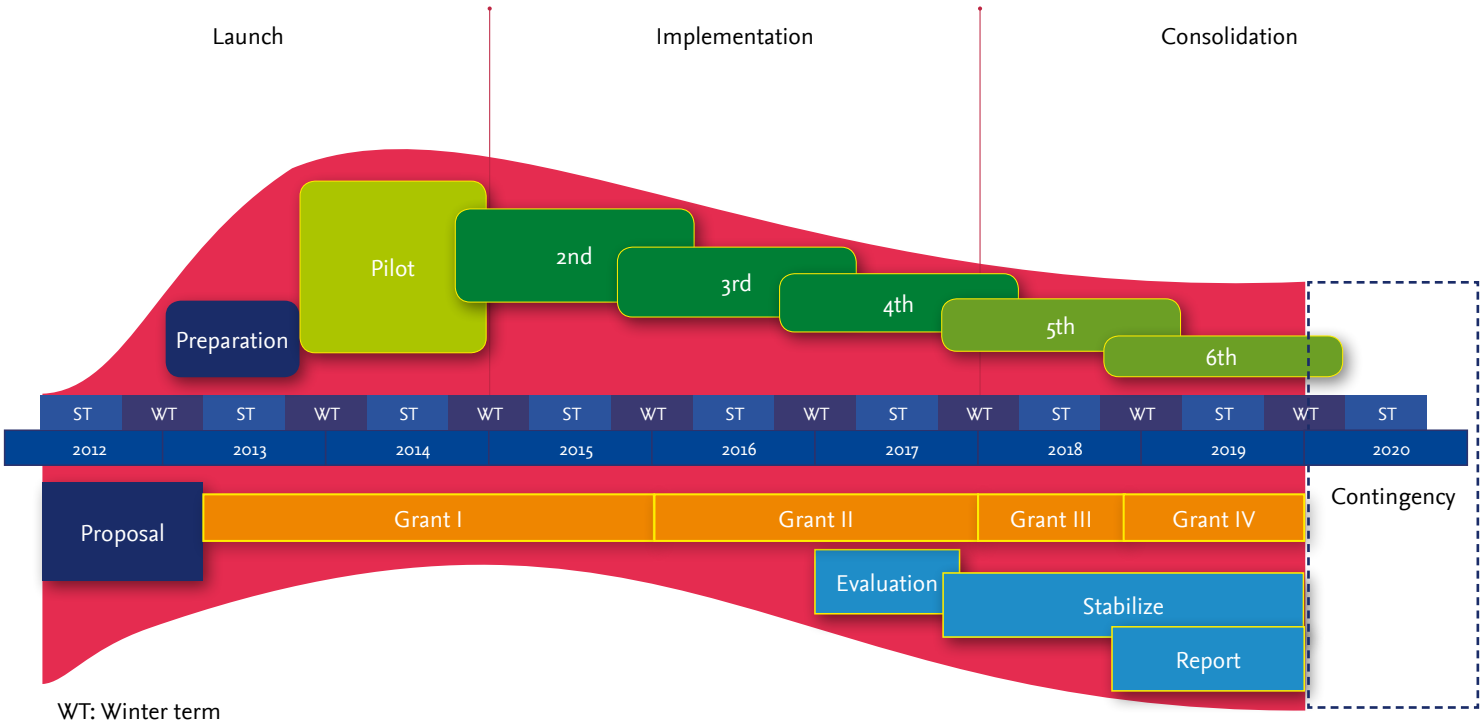

Figure 6. Over the entire project duration, the workload for administrative staff shifts between the academic program iterations and the strategic project perspective.

Introduction: Stakeholder goals and strategy

The MA "Intellectual Encounters of the Islamicate World" (IEIW) was proposed as an online learning pilot project within the Department of History and Cultural Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin (FUB). Starting in 2013, the Ministry for International Cooperation and Economic Development (BMZ) granted the first installment of what would later become seven years of federal funding, so that a cohort of 20 graduate students could immerse themselves into an online course centered on a subject that was academic indeed.

Advanced graduate studies in medieval theological history offer a prime example for a highly specialized area of research. Scholars in this field are acquainted with each other on a first-name basis the world over; their conferences are comfortable, frugal affairs in smallish venues. In Germany, only a handful of university departments offer the subject as a degree program, in part because the philological field has never recovered from the Nazi regime's catastrophic assault on its thinkers and traditions. At any given location, the active student population enrolled in courses on this topic numbers in the dozens at best. Those choosing to commit to its study long term are a modest crowd in more than one sense, because career opportunities for this kind of specialization continue to be sparse. It is all the more surprising, then, that the stakeholders underwriting these funds clearly reasoned with quite a utilitarian mindset.

Educational technologies had become wide-spread and affordable by 2013. Mobile devices could be made available in the Middle East region more easily than access to physical leaning infrastructures; sufficiently stable internet bandwidth already existed. Emergent interactive formats of digital learning, having come a long way from earlier passive web-based training formats, would allow interactive mentoring and personalized feedback for successful learning outcomes and help maintain high academic standards.

Thus digital distance-learning technologies could provide efficient access to a reputable master's degree for Eng-

lish-speaking students in the Middle East, especially for Palestinian students in the West Bank and similarly fragile contexts. The online learning program would enable participants to surmount geographic, financial and socio-political hurdles that had prevented them from attending a similarly rigorous graduate program on-site at local university campuses. Program alumni and their future employers could be assured that their degree courses satisfied the rigorous academic standards of excellence provided by a preeminent German university of international renown.

No less instrumental a view of the subject matter was taken. Students would ponder the intellectual exchange among three historic world religions that, on the one hand, produced an incredibly rich corpus of philosophical and scientific thought for historic study, and on the other hand continues to shape national borders and political conflicts in the region today. This kind of education would equip future professionals from all sides with skills and the capacity for engaging in intercultural dialogue. Their enrolment in a program for the study of cultural history would effectively immerse them in methods of intercultural discourse with theological scriptures. Furthermore, a carefully balanced composition of the student body and the immersive quality of study would simultaneously foster constructive discourse among a diverse cohort of contemporary fellow students from Israel, Palestinian territories and Germany.

The resulting project is holistic indeed, but it is also quite intimidating in its reach. One could consider ambitious the *higher education* goal of launching a state-of-the-art graduate studies program with international visibility in a humanities niche, whose success requires a small but steady stream of skilled applicants with a working knowledge of both English and Arabic, interested in medieval theology. Surely worthwhile on its own would be the *development goal* of providing access to a career-enhancing academic degree program and to equip future professionals in the Middle East with intercultural training. To these dual tasks, add the *innovation challenge* of designing, producing and operating a one-year master program as a distance-learning program, built with primarily digital learning materials and relying on predominantly online interaction, while at the same time controversial discourse on the merits of "digital humanities" has been dampening enthusiasm for technological experiments in the field.

The divergence of stakeholder agendas is obvious even from this brief of a sketch. This discrepancy would inevitably require trade-offs among the multilayered set of potentially conflicting goals. From the outset, the project scope encompassed so many dimensions that spectacular failure was actually unlikely in light of its multifaceted complexities and multidimensional goals. Various stakeholders would have noticed, of course, if the project failed to reach specified indicators. Yet the various aspects of experimental design and innovative instruction formats were so closely intertwined, and the number of predetermined breaking points was so large, that a gradual and quiet extinction of the program probably would not have surprised any of them. This section describes how the degree of freedom and flexibility necessary for true innovation arose from an entanglement of goals at the unlikely intersection of medieval philosophy and online learning.

Research agendas and technological innovation

The impetus for the launch of a trilateral master program in co-operation of German, Israeli and Palestinian universities to support and foster intercultural dialogue arose from a joint research initiative. Professors Sabine Schmidtke, Sari Nusseibeh and Sarah Stroumsa, three scholars of medieval religious and cultural history, were at the time based at the Freie Universität Berlin (FUB), Al-Quds University (AQU) and Hebrew University Jerusalem (HUJ) respectively. After having collaborated for several years, they began to investigate the outlines for a joint field of research. From 2008 on, their ground-breaking interdisciplinary research of the Islamicate world, shared with graduate and postgraduate students, had taken center stage over the course of several symposia, workshops, research papers and summer schools.

Originally coined by the historian Marshall Hodgson in 1947, the term "Islamicate world" describes social and cultural aspects arising from an Arabic and Persian literate tradition that can be found throughout the Muslim world and is not directly linked to the Islamic religion[1]. The concept delineates a socio-geographical expanse from Andalucía to the Hindukush Mountains[2], where commonalities of language and religion created a contiguous social space, making the fluid interchange of theological, philosophical, legal and scientific ideas the norm rather than the exception (see Figure 7).

These foundational activities congealed into a small artifact, which would grow into a building block for developing the IEIW program. As befits the current century, this inchoate foundation took digital form. In the summer of 2009, technologically knowledgeable organizers of a Marrakesh research workshop created a proper homepage[3] with the goal of providing participants with preparatory materials, an opportunity to interact remotely and to capture research progress as well as results. This humble digital artifact supplied a virtual framework for studying the intellectual and multicultural legacy of the medieval Islamic world. Intended first and foremost as a virtual library,

the website made publicly available numerous medieval philosophical texts, along with a broad array of research tools.

From its inception, the two-fold intention of this platform was to highlight interconnections among medieval thinkers and to foster both interdisciplinary research and increased cross-cultural understanding for modern day audiences. In the words of one of its authors, the platform could become a seedbed for "growing an international community of scholars, students and educated lay readers, dedicated to studying these philosophical works comparatively, who wish to engage in an ongoing discussion about them." Its initial function was as a study tool for a week-long workshop in Marrakesh at the end of the academic year for students and faculty enrolled in four parallel courses on the intellectual history of the world of Islam taught at Bar-Ilan University (Jerusalem), al-Quds University (Jerusalem), Tübingen (Germany), and Yale (United States). The website's basic interaction features were then used to capture results of the workshop, helped participants stay in touch and created visibility for the research framework that would attract outside interest. Recognizing the potential of the growing movement of *open education* for their scattered field, the researchers responsible soon afterwards turned their online content repository into an "Open Educational Resource" (OER). The content was thus made available without licensing fees for educational and research uses beyond its original purpose.

This decision marks an important connection between innovative transdisciplinary scholarship in a humanities niche with the global macrotrends of digitalization in higher education. In Europe and North America especially, digital network technologies continued to penetrate higher education at an increasing rate, largely driven by access to internet-enabled mobile devices and consumer broadband. Similar but more selective trends could be observed globally, with some regions in the Southern Hemisphere "leapfrogging" technological steps such as broadband-connected PCs in favor of internet access on smart mobile devices, but there was also a deepening "digital divide" between social strata with access to such infrastructure and those without. The *open education* movement took these trends as a starting point for its focus on content rather than technologies. It argued that making educational resources, especially those created with public funds, freely available digitally would lower the threshold for access to high quality educational content. Concurrent with the timing of the Marrakesh workshop, open education was being adopted by numerous prestigious universities as a sustainable approach for broader access to higher education worldwide (cf. Heise, 2018).

Having linked small-scale innovation in a community of scholars to the large-scale innovations of digital educational technologies, Professors Schmidtke, Stroumsa and Nusseibeh required only a short leap of entrepreneurial imagination for the next logical step of academic entrepreneurship. The technological promise of dissolving the formal boundaries of educational institutions and nation states[4] could effectively be harnessed to the similarly transcendent approach of interdisciplinary study of the Islamicate world. Much of the newly discovered historic source material was being made available to researchers all over the world in digitized form. Leveraging channels for online interaction would broaden access from a small community of scholars funded through research organizations and philanthropic grants to students interested in the newly emergent field.

In brief, the idea of the program's initiators was to conceive, develop and pilot an online program, with an almost unprecedented degree of cooperation between various stakeholders within the German landscape of development, foreign policy and internationalization, in order to achieve a quantifiable impact within a notoriously complicated setting. Their joint intervention sought to increase access to higher education and improve educational opportunities in a politically, regulatory and socio-economically fragile context[5]. It was premised on the growing realization that the combined effort of these stakeholders and a holistic approach could more efficiently leverage various resources and multiple kinds of expertise into sustainable, more impactful outcomes.

The notion of *open education* explicitly aimed at inclusion across socio-demographic strata, especially relevant to those students belonging to marginalized groups within the political climate in their home region or excluded from higher education due to a lack of local opportunity. These technological means entailed the promise of removing constraints to professional training especially for Arabic-speaking students from the Middle East, namely in the fragile context of Palestinian higher education. In this notoriously complicated setting for development intervention, an audience of future leaders could benefit immensely from access to high quality educational programs independent of the participant's particular passport, living situation, personal faith, family tradition or precarious income.

An opportunity for development intervention

To advance the visibility and impact of a small emerging research field, an international graduate program is the natural organizational form. It can attract and instruct junior researchers in the concepts and methods suitable for scholarly investigation. Relationships within the tight-knit community of experts associated with activities of a rese-

arch agenda can be leveraged into teaching commitments. Instruction, mentoring and guidance can thus be provided by renowned instructors who count among the leading voices in their respective fields, to the benefit of students. The proposition of an interdisciplinary, trilateral program for historic study of the medieval Islamicate world was therefore a logical step in the development of the corresponding research unit at FUB.

The cooperation among the three founding scholars and their respective home universities to pursue the idea of a joint master's degree could have followed the previously established pattern of bottom-up research and teaching activities. Instead, in 2013 a window of opportunity presented itself for quickly creating and funding a master program within a rather short period. At that time, geopolitical signs for the peace process in the Middle East were pointing in a hopeful direction, implying at least a sufficient degree of stability in the foreseeable future to engage in socio-economic development. For Palestinian students, access to internationally respected higher education and the associated academic rigor at graduate and post-graduate levels had been severely constrained. More specifically, a humanities program with a focus on medieval philosophy was completely unavailable to them locally. Within German development and foreign policy interventions, educational initiatives in the Palestinian region have overwhelmingly focussed on technical subjects with practical applicability in the immediate context so as to avoid the risks of regional brain drain.

Arguably then, a program of advanced studies concerning the conditions of peaceful intercultural dialogue, albeit concentrating on medieval history, does have practical development application in the region's conflicts. A master's degree in the humanities from a prestigious German university can prove to be a career catalyst for Palestinian students, helping those from marginalized backgrounds in the West Bank and Gaza especially to prepare themselves for senior leadership positions. Therefore, offering an advanced education and qualification program with a strong emphasis on intercultural dialogue was an idea that resonated in the community of various institutional stakeholders. With the help of emergent technologies for teaching and learning as an enabling condition for access to a fragile region, providers of higher education would enable stakeholders of regional development to intervene for the educational benefit of a population difficult to reach by conventional means.

In terms of finding a host organization, the IEIW Master program could become an organic extension of the corresponding *History of the Islamicate World* research unit[6], which had been well established within the FUB History and Cultural Studies Department for several years. The cluster would provide a third-party buffering organization to create a partnership setting for institutions both on the Israeli and the Palestinian sides of a trilateral cooperation. Through collaboration with FUB's prominent in-house expertise with e-learning, it could provide the infrastructure, expertise and support for the launch of an online study program. Finally, FUB had an established track record of international study programs, research excellence, and access to dedicated funding sources for addressing the target region.

It was also necessary, however, to position the MA program in a way that would make it attractive to the participating universities as well. It was reasonably hypothesized that this could be achieved through the creation of a prominent international research collaboration with an emphasis on studying primary texts in the original Arabic. The intercultural approach to advanced studies in the history of religious and philosophical ideas could bring international visibility and potential political goodwill. Graduates would have acquired a thorough understanding of the deep links between Muslim, Jewish and Christian thinkers in the Middle Ages. The conflicted atmosphere and the political visibility of Israeli and Palestinian universities make formal partnerships notoriously difficult. Nevertheless, at least in terms of strategic incentives, a trilateral cooperation between the three participating university departments in Berlin and Jerusalem could be envisioned as a long-term organizational backbone for the IEIW Master program.

Thus, it was an ambitious but not outright impossible working assumption that governance for a joint graduate research setting could be situated within a formal co-operative framework among the three respective partner universities. It later turned out to become a foundational challenge, and serves as an example the first of several important learning occasions. Not even a subject as historically distant as the investigation of intellectual exchange during the medieval era is able to escape the conditions of the present environment. The structures and practices shaping the program's design are inevitably bound up in the political, social and cultural frameworks of modern-day human geography. As soon as the political window of goodwill that had enabled the partnership closed and more aggressive stances were taken by the conflicting parties in the Middle East, the institutional partnership became strained. At one point, a complete boycott of the program by Palestinian institutions such as the AQU threatened to derail the entire program until this situation could be compensated for by a more informal framework and additional efforts of the remaining partners.

The obvious lesson here pertains to a close examination of the assumptions underlying such stakeholder cooperations. If institutional structures in the targeted region create fragile contexts for marginalized groups, they represent deeply entrenched cultural norms that deny access to these groups based on criteria such as religious faith, notions of ethnicity or simply poverty. The point is that political and

educational institutions are not necessarily fragile in themselves, they can be quite rigid in fact, but they produce fragility in the life-world of those excluded individuals. By the same token, these institutions cannot unfortunately be relied upon to provide stable partnerships within international collaborations aiming to alleviate this intentionally created fragility for local student populations.

Higher education access in fragile contexts

In 2013, the initial IEIW project proposal outlined the dual project objective as increasing access to a state-of-the-art academic education and providing advanced intercultural skills training in the Middle East. It proposed the creation of a 12-month, consecutive interdisciplinary blended-learning master program for a cohort of a maximum of 20 students from the Palestinian territories, Israel and Germany in a ratio of 2:2:1. The experience of jointly studying and researching the intellectual roots of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, particularly their closely interwoven development up to early modern periods, sought to provide professional instruction and to introduce a level playing field for intercultural dialogue among all the participants.

When the goal involves broader higher education access on the institutional supply-side, an obvious consideration is the actual demand within the target audience and its ability to take advantage of newly created higher education opportunities. Requiring participating students from the Middle East to reside in Germany for the duration of the program would have been prohibitively expensive. More importantly, even if such a stay had been possible, it would probably have reduced the accessibility precisely for those marginalized groups that the program was attempting to reach. The potential benefits of using e-learning formats and technologies of distance learning consisted precisely in offering access close to the life-world of participants in the West Bank and Gaza, specifically. Suitable content, instructional scaffolding and reliable assessment formats could be provided remotely, relying on the availability of a sufficiently stable network infrastructure and consumer-grade private computing devices. Networked digital technologies could create the kind of communicative networks among students, scholars and universities – each with their own backgrounds – that would enable constructive dialogue across national borders, political and religious lines of conflict and segregation.

From a funding perspective, the sizable digital component was a helpful ingredient to position the program as a markedly innovative format that could help exploit the potential of these technologies for higher education. With regard to online education, it is an open question, in the German context in particular, how qualities of "academic excellence" could be maintained in a graduate program of distance learning. Naturally, there was the question whether blended learning could allow the delivery of such advanced education not just to a broader audience, but also at a lower cost compared to conventional formats of on-site instruction. The project could thus contribute insights into the potential use of technology-enhanced learning in furthering the political goal of internationalization in German higher education, with an exploration of instructional formats in the growing area of the digital humanities.

The IEIW proposal emphasized that the program did not claim to provide ready-made solutions toward training intercultural skills with nascent Israeli-Palestinian civil society. Instead, it considered any such progress toward the foundation for mutual respect as emerging from shared activities in direct approximation of each other as part of a diverse learning cohort. An explicit reference model was the "West-Eastern Divan Orchestra[7]" for young Israeli, Palestinian and other Arab musicians, founded in 1999 by Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim. In sum, the IEIW Master Degree proposal posited that learnings from such demonstrated achievements in civil-society building via joint engagement in the performing arts could be replicated in a graduate academic setting. The participation of Israelis and Palestinians in the graduate studies was not an add-on feature, but could be justified by methodological and pedagogical considerations alone. From the higher education perspective, therefore, the intended development outcomes in fragile contexts were desirable and worthwhile side-effects, but they related to considerations of the project design such as recruiting, funding, degree-granting, not to the learning design of the proposed graduate courses.

The initial funding tranche was the first of four consecutive grants, subject to continuous quality monitoring and externally conducted evaluation for continued funding in 2016 through 2019 (see Figure 6). During the evaluation cycles, the notion of fragile contexts, which the original proposal had mentioned only in reference to the politically instable situation in the Palestinian territories, became increasingly prominent. The use of the term "fragility" was an outgrowth of dealing with "failed states" in foreign policy and development settings originally referring primarily to state structures and governmental activities in those political contexts in which the state has only a limited monopoly on the use of force, cannot provide even the minimum of basic social services, and whose institutions lack legitimacy (OECD, 2013, 2015). Meanwhile, "fragility" has become more broadly applied in the parlance of German foreign policy and development programs, now including socio-cultural aspects of instability for marginalized social groups outside of state structures.

In education and training programs, the term is used to draw attention to the socio-economic dimension affecting the livelihood of such groups, taking account of factors contributing to fragility such as a lack of validity in private contracts, a lack of stability for social norms, a lack of legitimacy for educational organizations and an inefficient allocation of human resources (cf. Binder & Weinhardt, 2014). Such an understanding comes closer to describing, albeit in simplified terms, the situation of Palestinians affected by fragile circumstances in spite of institutionalized state structures on both sides of the conflict and a more or less stable provision of social services. An appropriate shorthand description of "fragile contexts" must capture living situations of marginalization and precariousness that afflicts only segments of a given local population due to ethnic, religious or other factors, as put forward more recently (Mcloughlin, 2016).

The breadth of the latter, most recent definition implies that only holistic approaches that cut across separate policy spheres and stakeholder agendas can deliver effective development and training for these groups. The IEIW grant application was somewhat ahead of this discourse when it outlined the creation of just such a holistic intervention without active use of the fragility concept in 2013. The master program it proposed to implement was to address a fundamental deficit in the regional educational landscape of the Middle East, to introduce and maintain rigorous academic standards to provide access to high quality instruction, to contribute to social cohesion by virtue of educating future professionals' intercultural skills, and thus ultimately to have a long-term impact on the continuing efforts supporting the peace process.

Additional benefits were to accrue on the supply-side of the equation, furthering the internationalization and modernization of the three universities involved through academic partnerships, knowledge exchange and the use of digital technologies while advancing a promising field of interdisciplinary research.

2. Shaping a higher education intervention

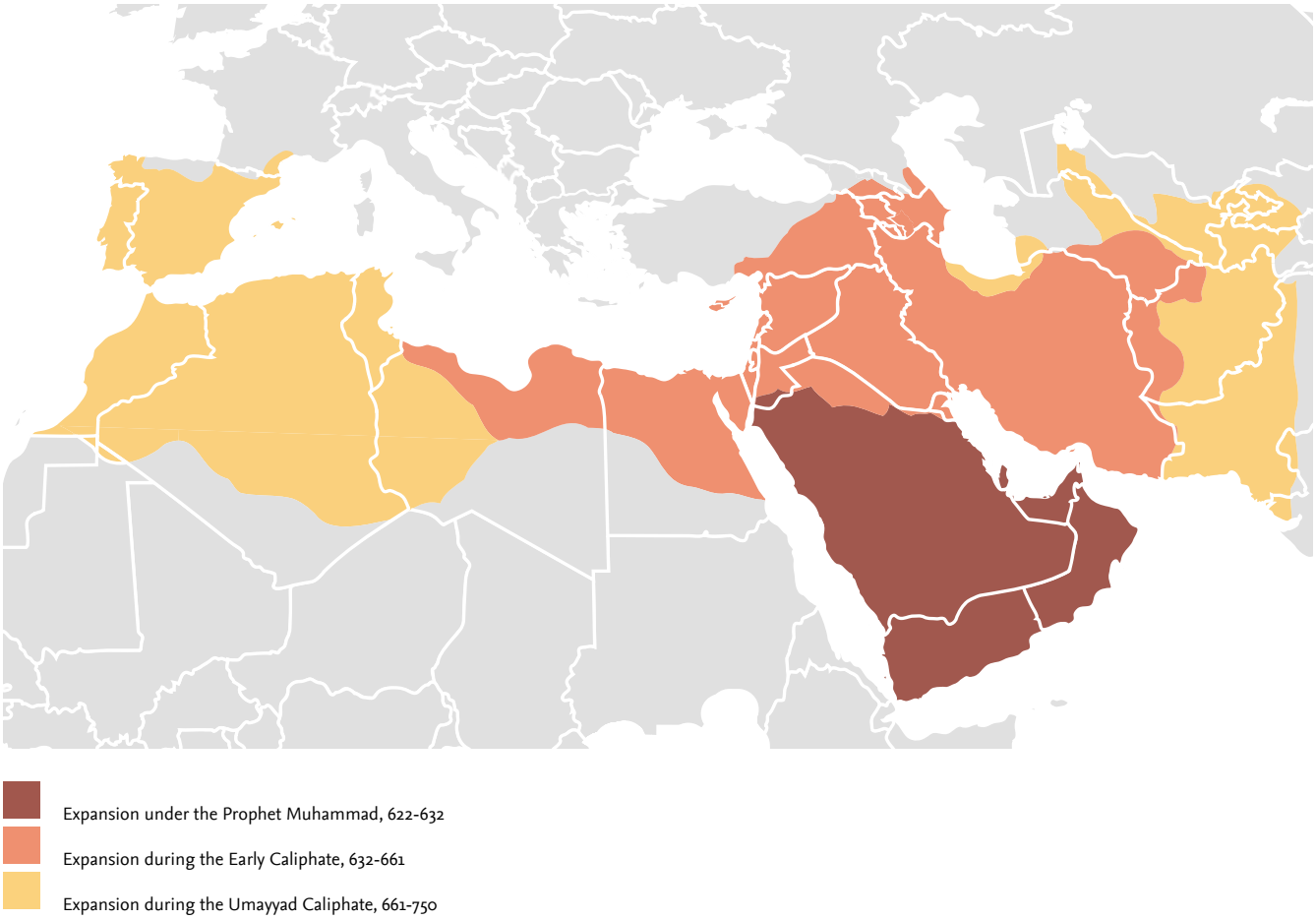

Figure 7. The cultural space of the medieval Islamicate world transcends familiar modern state borders and regional contiguities.

Introduction: A mindset of design

What is or ought to become digital in the "digital humanities" often remains underspecified. The term's references and actual uses can be fraught with connotations that are neither conceptually nor methodologically demarcated clearly (Raunig & Höfler, 2018). Current discussions center on the use of digital tools for research, such as making materials digitally available, or making natively digital materials accessible to philological and historical methods (vgl. Vogeler, 2018). These efforts rest on the rather timidly stated conviction that the humanities have something vital to contribute to the understanding and analysis of the post-digital society, which is rooted in a core methodology of interpreting and reflecting on texts and meanings (Krämer, 2018).

While such activities are a central concern of current research programs, however, it remains unclear how digital technologies can meaningfully contribute to learning processes and instructional formats in an academic context, where an initial reaction to technology-enhanced formats (especially in German-speaking contexts) is one of skepticism due to the loss of social presence implied in a mediated, asynchronous teaching-learning arrangement. This blind spot is attributable in part to the rapid technological innovation cycles that are largely driven by software engineers and commercial markets, not educational designers and institutions of higher learning[8]. The technical expertise and practical skills required for experimentation with new technologies in academic teaching continues to be rather high, while there is little to no career incentive for most junior academics to move beyond a mere instrumental use of digital tools, leaving the rest up to strategic decisions in their local e-learning departments.

A notable distinction of the IEIW project in this regard is not that it possessed an initial expertise or even propensity for digital learning. Instead, it was the organizational hypothesis that a small, scattered field could benefit from a joint virtual space for teaching and learning that from the outset relegated the technological aspects to a means, rather than an end in themselves. This impulse can be called entrepreneurial, in line with recent observations that "itinerant academics" (Whitchurch, 2018) have to constantly adapt to different, unfamiliar roles in an environment of precarious funding and nonlinear career paths. Yet it is notable that seasoned researchers and scholars, undeterred by the layered complexities of their vision, ventured forth with a great deal of enthusiasm and an uncharacteristically narrow basis of empirical data to support the hypothesis entailed in their project.

Of course, the higher education and development goals of the IEIW project were grounded in professional experience and scientific theory. Yet the creation of a real-life program for imparting knowledge and skills to students had to rely on a toolkit that differed substantially from methods that researchers have traditionally relied on for generating knowledge. What educators and e-learning developers create is expected to make the world a better place, whether it be material artifacts or social activities. In their highest aspirations, they succeed in creating efficient, effective and elegant systems of teaching and learning. In tackling these tasks, they embrace the mindset and the methods of designers. The strategic insights that may be gleaned from the iterations of the IEIW program thus concern design challenges and corresponding solutions.

Experienced users of digital learning technologies realize, of course, that the numerous apparent benefits of such virtual educational settings accrue only if they are supported by investments elsewhere. A well-established research finding after a century of technology-enhanced distance learning holds that learning outcomes are independent of a particular medium, whether it be correspondence courses, radio, television, CD-ROM, the World Wide Web, mobile Apps, MOOCs or other emergent forms of e-Learning (R. C. Clark & Mayer, 2016). Instead, the key determinant for successful individual learning outcomes is the suitability of the instructional design choices (Merrill, 2012). The pedagogic and instructional challenges largely determine the effectiveness and efficiency of such designs and have been thoroughly researched and documented elsewhere (Araya, 2013; Davies, 2011; Gross & Davies, 2015; Mcloughlin, 2016; OECD, 2013; cf. 2015). The scope of this study does not permit either a thorough critical review of this body of literature nor does it claim an actual contribution to this field of research. Suffice to say that the conception, production and operational administration of a suitable instructional design is a labor-intensive, costly and complicated task, whose strategic milestones are outlined in this section.

Designing learning for complex general skills

The challenges involving the creation of a successful learning design from scratch are considered here as generalized principles. They manifest themselves in concrete design decisions and operational tasks ranging from faculty and student relations to administrative workflows and strategic program management. Relying on technology-enhanced instruction and blended learning at a distance by itself neither helps nor hinders skills-training for intercultural dialogue with participants from fragile contexts. As long as the instructional design itself is suited to the intended learning goals and provides learners with adequate scaffolding, feedback and assessment, there is no inherent reason it should fail.

Having said this, combining acquisition and practice in general cognitive skills, such as intercultural dialogue, with transdisciplinary graduate studies in a specialized subfield of the humanities is a complex instructional design challenge. The knowledge associated with awarding a graduate academic degree is conventionally related to specialized disciplinary skills. The first hypothesis to be tested by the learning design of the pilot program thus concerned the acquisition of intercultural skills by students during the study of historic sources, which involved empirical evidence of fruitful intellectual exchange between representatives of different religious cultures. Engaging them in academic analysis of such commonalities could create a rational foundation for questioning deeply seated assumptions. Hermeneutic reflection on identity and otherness in the program's subject matter could be expected to broaden geographically and deepen intellectually a given student's initial worldview. Graduates would thus acquire a more inclusive perspective regarding the roots of modern-day politico-cultural conflicts in the region and the diverging viewpoints on a given interlocutor.

During their program of study, students were to familiarize themselves with the history of ideas in the medieval Islamicate world and examine the intellectual roots of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The program curriculum could thus be construed as a mechanism for enhancing the participants' intercultural understanding while they simultaneously developed skills for intercultural dialogue. These same skills for intercultural competence would be deepened by academic reflection and research practice related to the program's subject matter. A second hypothesis to be tested by the pilot therefore involved the students' shared commitment to the demanding activity and discursive engagement with a diverse group of fellow students that is a basic method of the humanities. Contrasting the conflictual situations in the contemporary life-world of participants from the region, the program could create a concentrated

learning community. It could allow students to engage with a challenging topic of shared interest in a neutral space, albeit virtual, where they were removed geographically and temporally from present day lines of conflict.

Explicit emphasis in both skill dimensions rests on imparting knowledge to and building the skills of intercultural dialogue of program participants. Studying the commonalities of medieval religious discourses firmly embedded an intercultural perspective in the methodology of the subject matter, enhancing disciplinary knowledge. Collaboration within a culturally and religiously diverse student cohort ensured the integration of the practical exercise of such dialogue in the immediate learning environment, increasing corresponding cognitive and metacognitive skills. To alleviate the inherent tension between them, the program design had to successfully balance these two kinds of knowledge and accept the inevitable trade-offs between them.

An enticing feature of this learning design is the positive feedback-loop of mutual benefits entailed within it. Active participation of Palestinian students in a state-of-the-art graduate program of study that offers an internationally recognized degree from a renowned university would obviously enhance alumni's career opportunities. At the same time, their participation in the program would directly increase both the diversity in the cultural background of the student cohort and the situated expertise in predominantly Muslim traditions and thus contribute twofold to the methodological foundations of the research approach.

The important take-away here is that the participation of both Israeli and Palestinian students is inherently justified by the methodological approach of the research agenda underlying the program of study, even without a development agenda. While tuition fees are political anathema in Germany and certainly would be out of reach for the vast majority of students in precarious circumstances such as the Palestinian territories, one could well imagine an identical master program offered at the usual rates required of students at a comparable Anglo-Saxon university on its professional, academic and research merits alone. The small mental leap of connecting the emergent subject matter of a research field with simultaneously emergent instructional technologies, in contrast, opened tangible avenues towards growth, substance and impact in a win-win situation for education providers and students alike, through an expanded option space for educational and development interventions within a previously inaccessible area.

Previous collaboration projects of the founding scholars reinforced the observation that the relevant community of interested specialists and potential students was small and scattered throughout the world. If digital technologies could facilitate such a program in an online format, while eliminating the constraints of geographic distance and political borders, they should be leveraged into such an undertaking that much sooner. Students could apply, enroll and participate without having to relocate. Visiting lecturers could be contracted as virtual faculty without necessitating either travel arrangements or the dreaded administrative overhead on both sides associated with teaching a semester at a foreign university. Their strong teaching commitment would be assured if the convenience of an online program related to their particular specialty thus had the added benefit of providing them with a carefully selected audience of highly qualified and intensely motivated students. Blended learning could be leveraged for this project with the primary focus, not on digital didactics, but on the organizational mode of a learning space that would be difficult and much more costly to create with nondigital means.

Viewed in this manner, the particular specialization on Islamicate discourses in medieval history itself made the project eminently suitable for an online learning pilot. Testing the promise of extending graduate educational opportunities in such a fragile context with the help of digital tools would be a relatively costly and fairly risky proposition in any subject. But the risks of potential failure, wasted resources and damaged reputations would have been much greater in a prominent field with many competitors. For a pilot project, the narrow disciplinary focus in a specialized humanities niche was therefore no hindrance, but helpful indeed.

Potentials of the blended learning mode

Passing the strategic goals of the project through the funnel of practical considerations provides the vagueness of initial ideas with a workable, concrete shape. Ideas developed during the years preceding the IEIW grant proposal congealed into the contours of a blended learning program, with some on-site components and about 80% mediated e-learning content. As is typical for innovative higher education projects, the chosen model of instruction was not based on a thorough examination of research in digital pedagogy or empirical data on learner behavior in the region. It was intuitively clear to the founding scholars, from both their teaching practices and intercultural experiences, that the kind of quality they aimed to maintain in the program could not be achieved by remote instruction and e-learning alone. Some elements of direct interaction between instructors and students on-site would be needed to allow the corporeal dimension of diversity in a social setting to manifest itself.

With regard to the intended learning goals, only if participants were immersed in the tangible qualities of dealing with the otherness of their fellow students would they re-

flect on their inventory of communicative skills to the point of being able to address them. More practically speaking, since this would likely be the first academic online program for most participants, some in-person onboarding would prove useful in assuring the effective use of online formats right from the outset. The basic outline of the program thus rested on hypotheses derived from a mixture of teaching experience, subject matter expertise, practical considerations and intuition.

Similarly, the inferred demand for the imminent program could not be based on any concrete data of actual demand. There was no formal equivalent to market research activities that one would undertake for the launch of a consumer product. Instead, the educational deficit was diagnosed systemically, as a general need for advanced professional degrees, with the added skill set for intercultural dialogue as a bonus in the politically conflicted environment. Modern technologies of distance learning were thus expected to alleviate some of the systemic deficits of higher education in fragile contexts by expanding access to learning opportunities. In addition, the mediated nature of the program would broaden potential access far beyond the immediate surroundings of al-Quds University (AQU) and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (HUJ) to include students from predominantly Muslim countries, eventually including students from Iran, Afghanistan, Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Peru, the United States and the Netherlands.

This extension of reach and access comes with a price, however. Imagining an on-site format at FUB that would be comparable to the IEIW online program in learning goals and curriculum, the reality would be that expenditures per student would inevitably be higher. Even though the original project setup had proposed a trilateral cooperation framework with the two universities in Jerusalem, it had been the clear expectation from the beginning that, for the foreseeable future, the bulk of pedagogical and technological investment would have to take place on the German side of the triangle. If, over time, some of the workload could be distributed more equitably among the three partners, it should be seen as a substantial success in improving fragile institutional structures of the target region. It furthermore stands to reason, though, that such a shift is more likely to be the effect of structural changes in the economic and political environment of the partner universities, rather than the trilateral academic cooperation itself.

To gauge what costs are appropriate for such a course of study, it is illuminating to imagine an identical graduate program without the availability of digital tools. No matter which version of the program a given student would enroll in, assuming course designers and program administrators have done their work properly, her learning outcomes in terms of personal knowledge and skills upon graduating would be identical. An alumna would be expected to demonstrate a competent mastery of graduate academic skills, a comprehensive analysis of intellectual exchange in medieval Islam with other religions, and a grasp of suitable research methods for historic and cultural inquiry.

All other things being equal, one would expect the on-site program to require the smaller investment of the two, if only by making superfluous the cost of an online classroom, content digitization, training and support. Yet this reduction in cost would be irrelevant, because the program would now be inaccessible to the very students it aimed to attract. Academic talents could be recruited from many different parts of the world, but not from the fragile contexts of the Middle East and Palestinian territories in particular. A more sensible comparison value to determine the program's efficient use of material resources would therefore have to include the costs of full scholarships, including the cost of living, that would then enable students from fragile contexts to reside in Berlin for the duration of the program.

Even if such funding were available, it would still leave open the question whether an on-site course would be preferable to the blended format. Student feedback during the project has repeatedly confirmed the contributing effects that distance-learning has had for the development of intercultural communication skills. The primarily web-based modules additionally included three face-to-face phases per academic cycle, with seminars and workshops in Còrdoba and Berlin. The shared social space during these phases strongly encouraged students and teachers to interact in discussions, classes and examinations within an inevitably intercultural setting. But looking back, students reported that the distancing effects of the blended learning formats were crucial for them to practice these communication skills gradually and rehearse unfamiliar roles of interaction within the setting of a more protected, mediated space.

The benefits of using blended learning formats, then, lie not in a reduction of costs, at least where access to higher education and training is concerned. Digitalization and mediatization of instructional content in this case does not lead to a lesser form of learning when compared to on-site teaching. It is an investment into educational access that opens pathways of learning for students in the target region that otherwise would remain unavailable.

Scoping and scaling the program parameters

Using digital tools for access to fragile contexts does not preclude additional constraints influencing the design of a successful, sustainable educational program, with the most

immediate being actual learner demand. It is a defining feature of fragile settings and precarious living conditions that the ability to plan for the long term is limited and that individuals are forced to heavily discount the future compared to the present. The target audience of intended students can be expected to carefully consider investing material resources, personal effort and the time necessary for a commitment to the program, weighing opportunity costs such as foregone income. From the perspective of future applicants, fragile contexts create such economic pressures that the opportunity cost for participation in a two-year program is simply prohibitive. The two year duration common for German master's degree programs in the post-Bologna landscape would severely limit the ability of students from fragile contexts to participate and successfully complete the degree. Recruiting a suitably divergent mix of students to the program would depend on communicating a persuasive value proposition.

Moreover, a two-year program is also difficult to align with available funding frameworks. Public administration on a state and federal level, as a rule, adheres to a fiscal year whose budget cycles begin in January, creating substantial compatibility issues with higher education whose project funding follows the academic year beginning in October. The initial grant covered a generous project duration of three years, with contingency funding at least implicitly dependent on a proof-of-concept, namely measurable success in the defined outcomes. Calculating a minimum of one semester for program design, staff and student recruiting and operational ramp-up, then, a first cohort of applicants enrolled in a two-year program would just barely be able to finish their degree within the initial funding cycle. An assessment of program viability within the initial funding period would prove difficult, creating a substantial risk for continued provision of funds for program and staff. Moreover, the second cycle of a two-year program would overlap with the end of the initial funding period, creating uncertainty for students and commitment pressure for the funders. The obvious alternative, a one-year master program, would be able to deliver a proof of viability, but risked running afoul of the expectations for academic substance and rigorous practice that were the focus of the research unit and its standing in the history department as well as the strategic perspective of the host university.

As a practical result, a decision regarding the overall program design was made to develop the curriculum for a one-year program with the option to write the master thesis subsequent to the two-semester course phase. The Freie Universität Berlin (FUB) would offer the 12-month MA program, calculated in conformity with Bologna standards to a total 60 ECTS credit points, for an annual cohort of 20 students, the majority of whom would be recruited from the Middle East region. Due to the short duration of the program, part-time enrolment was not an option; participation required a full-time commitment for the duration. With this format, two full cycles could be completed within the initial funding phase, allowing for sufficient substance to evaluate the program's academic quality and structural sustainability (see Figure 6).

After the initial grant, contingency funding would be granted in subsequent installments based on quality monitoring and outcome evaluation for students in the initial academic cycles. An outcome evaluation would obviously have to focus on the academic outcomes, because the development impact would take substantially longer to manifest itself in a tangible manner. Even with two cohorts of alumni and a third one enrolled, empirical assessment of the project's higher education outcomes were just as difficult to capture. Any measurement of learning achievements has to consider the generally unclear relationships between teacher choices for curriculum and learning design on the one hand and the individual learner's motivation and learning skills on the other. Both variables are strongly interdependent and notoriously impact actual learning outcomes. To put it plainly, some students may perform exceptionally well, in spite of a poorly designed curriculum or instructional design. And some students may perform poorly, even though curriculum and instruction are beyond reproach.

Recent research has therefore suggested that mechanisms and formats for adult teaching and learning should be more explicitly considered in the context of design. Adopting such a designer perspective might prove helpful, especially when examining the role and the uses of technology in education (Laurillard, 2013). Indeed, when instructional decisions are made and suitable means of teaching are developed, we do not usually investigate them with the scrutiny of a theoretically derived hypothesis awaiting empirical verification. Instead, the standard approach is to define the desired learning outcomes, to then select the means to achieve them, and to subsequently specify criteria defining learner success, such as grades. We use this information to judge student performance - but we do not typically judge the instructional design.

In terms of empirical verification, this is tantamount to hypothesizing that certain teaching methods will lead to desired learning outcomes, measuring the resulting grades, and in the event of unsatisfactory outcomes, concluding that the students were deficient, but leaving the hypothesis of instructional scaffolding intact (Laurillard, 2013, p. 5). In practice, of course, an experienced and capable instructor will question and continually improve her teaching repertoire and, just as obviously, a course that every single participant fails will be just as critically examined as a course in which all participants graduate with the highest possible marks. All of this reinforces Laurillard's observation that the problem of teaching is not one of theoretical science, but one of the "right fit" between

instructor, students, subject, setting and methodology to achieve certain goals, in other words, a problem of design and a science of the artificial (Simon, 1969). Assessing the quality of an instructional design invariably involves reflection on the assumptions for the underlying impact model, that is, the relative importance of teachers and students on the one hand and environmental variables on the other (Fabry, 2015).

Standard evaluations[9] of learning outcomes in higher education programs focus on effectiveness and efficiency; by definition, they are able to provide only limited insights into the operational decisions that later turn into important milestones on the road of program design – both for success as well as for setbacks. That many of these lessons are lost is evidenced by the fact that the history of higher education innovation in Germany cannot be written without acknowledging the many successful pilot projects that withered away once the initial funding dried up.

It is therefore critical to keep in mind that any attempt to reliably quantify the successful leverage of learning outcomes into career advancement might overburden the scope of a one-year program. Numerous factors well beyond the control of project design and successful graduation influence subsequent alumni career trajectories. They run the gamut of their individual life situations, from individual life choices and family situations to the impact of geopolitical shifts on the local labor market.

More appropriate for assessing the effectiveness of the program than a well-intentioned but unrealistic output-based perspective is therefore an input-based assessment. As in judging any other design artifact, the question then becomes one of the "right fit". Does the instructional design and the structure of an individual's learning journey through the program suitably correspond with the expected learning goals? The key measure of assessment of the IEIW learning design, in other words, is whether achievable skills for professional leadership and intercultural dialogue have been realistically defined, controlled for at the beginning of the program, problematized and practiced in an adequate manner and assessed at program completion with sufficient reliability.

3. Supporting individual learning outcomes

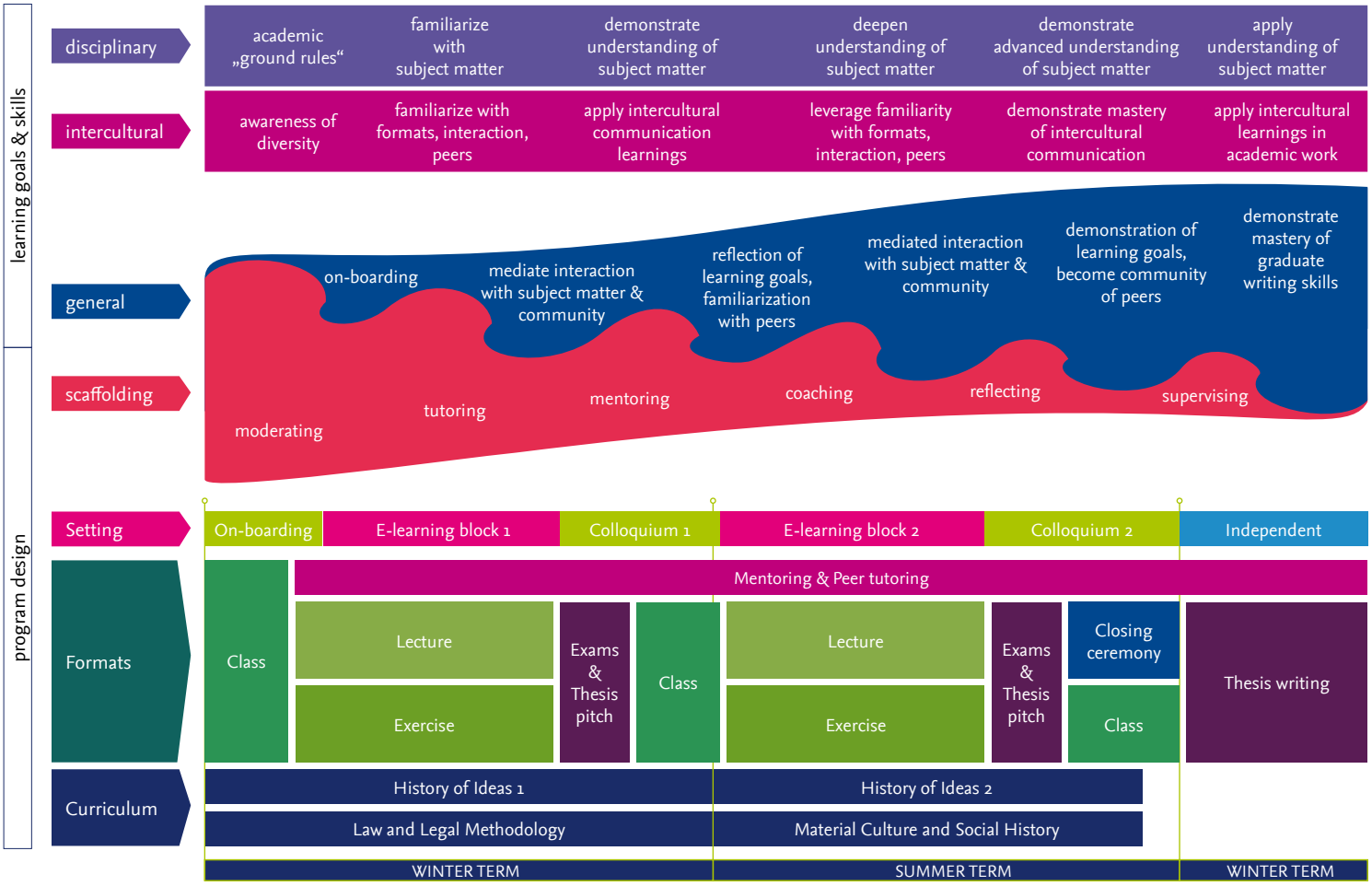

Figure 8. Multiple learning goals must be supported by scaffolding as well as the overall learning design at the levels of curriculum, available learning formats, and the (blended) mode of instruction.

Introduction: The role of technologies

Replacing conventional on-site teaching with a blended or online learning format is not supposed to modify directly *what* is learned, namely the subject matter or the curriculum. It is expected to affect *how* this curriculum is learned. Prior to questions of technology and mediatization, it matters which instructional formats are selected and which modes of learning are required or encouraged. Depending on their respective qualities, these selections again impact *how* learning takes place and therefore *what* is learned. For a blended program, it is therefore useful to consider these instructional formats not primarily for their technological characteristics. Instead, the first question is how they correspond to the available modes of guided, self-directed or peer-learning. Technological mediation might help or hinder some aspects of the learning outcomes, but they do not fundamentally change the fact that a combination of these three modes is inherent in each format.

A crucial insight to be gleaned from this paradox is that effective use of digital technologies can solve *some* of these challenges, whereas *others* are augmented or made more difficult by the use of mediating technologies and thus have to be addressed separately. Although sometimes prior technology decisions pose some constraints on program design, the decision for or against a given format, practice or structure of learning should therefore be determined by pedagogical considerations, and not be driven by an *a priori* technological decision.

The online setting has created a different kind of spatial arrangement for the IEIW program. The instructional focus is no longer the location or format of teaching, but on the process of learning. Aspects of this process have become the main driver of learning design (Jahnke, 2015). Students co-expand the space to include their own resources and practices of effective learning. They need guidance and feedback, however, on what constitutes appropriate and acceptable extensions of the classroom space. An obvious example is plagiarism. In early program iterations, for example, it became clear that the pressure of impending deadlines lead some students to turn in papers not with any sophisticated type of forgery, but with large sections copied and pasted from freely accessible online resources such as Wikipedia. As such, they were easily discernible by instructors as inadequate, but understood not as an activity to be sanctioned as would have been appropriate in a case of blatant plagiarism during an ordinary course. Instead, these cases highlighted the need for more specific attention to the expectations demarcating acceptable academic practices. Such demands are intimately related to the exigencies of a virtual space in which multiple educational systems and institutional backgrounds are entangled. Just like intercultural issues, many unspoken assumptions of an on-site educational setting need to be reexamined because they are not equally obvious or self-evident to all participants.

This further reinforces the observation that locations and their real-world contexts do not completely disappear or become irrelevant within the virtual setting. In fact, the online learning process is best considered as situated in a multiple, co-located context that will influence the individual learning journey for each student and strongly shape this journey's ultimate outcomes. Rather than as a hindrance or an obstacle, this spatial arrangement can be considered in terms of diversity as an enabling condition for a more complex learning expedition (Jahnke, Norqvist, & Olsson, 2014).

Such spatial considerations are helpful, because they highlight similar structures in conventional teaching and learning. In their current form, analog academic formats such as lectures, seminars, tutorials and workshops are the result of temporal and spatial constraints. They are shaped by the constraints of a system whose formats and structures have evolved in Europe since the Age of Enlightenment and are now sturdy enough to withstand any kind of superficial innovative change. The use of digital instructional formats have made these conditions of time and space malleable, negotiable and contingent. The innovative impulse is not so much to disrupt these formats and replace them with something unfamiliar, which invariably requires learning by students and instructors alike about the technology used by.

Indeed, relying on more established forms, such as lectures, seminars, group exercises and tutorials as well as relying on a globally known LMS (Learning Management System) achieves two separate results. Adopting them with only slight modifications related to their mediatization paid respect to the educational pedigree of these formats within the humanities, by acknowledging their effectiveness. Even more importantly, the reliance on established and familiar formats as far as digital instruction was concerned acknowledged that the project's course access was defined in regard to educational and development goals, not technological innovation.

Defining multi-level learning goals

A distinguishing feature of design processes for graduate programs in the humanities is uncertainty regarding the definition of learning goals. Whether a student has mastered the subject matter and the corresponding disciplinary methods can be assessed in a straightforward manner, because factual knowledge is testable and research skills can be demonstrated. But successful graduates of a master program are expected to command more general cognitive skills as well, including those relating to problem-solving, self-reflection, critical thinking, practical ethics, communicative range and leadership abilities (Whetten & Clark, 1996). Nor are they limited to cognitive competencies, since they include meta-cognitive skills to realistically gauge the quality of these skills for oneself (Mayer, 1998).

Difficult to define as they are, the importance of these learning goals cannot be overstated. An indication is the shift in terminology used to describe them[10]. The sociological figure "academic habit" underscores their intimate, if nebulous connection to higher education (Bourdieu, 2004). The label "soft skills" that continues to be prevalent in the human resources literature points to difficulties in quantifying them, but the connotation of a somehow lesser set of capabilities annoys liberal arts educators (Lee, 2006; Welzer, 2007). Meanwhile, "soft skills" have taken center stage in the arena of higher education policy under the label of "employability" (Andrews & Higson, 2008), which explicitly includes various "literacies" related, for example, to media, digital technologies, and learning strategies (Kalantzis, 2006). In contemporary knowledge societies, they are considered career fundamentals for entrepreneurship (Jaroschinsky & Rózsa, 2015) and managerial responsibilities (Kirchherr et al. 2018).

It is easy to recognize mastery of such skills when they are present, but designing a framework for their acquisition and training remains problematic. Educators responsible

for creating suitable programs cannot usually give a unified definition for the learning goals and operative means of their assessment, because curriculum and instructional formats cannot teach the desired skills directly. Rather, they emerge gradually as indirect learning outcomes over the course of an entire program – not as a by-product, but as properties transcending individual learning units. To consider them in the design of an educational format then means to pay special attention to learning processes that transcend individual instructional units (such as lectures or seminars) and include settings like the interaction of the student peer-group and the relationship between instructors and students that impact the respective learning outcomes.

Including transdisciplinary cognitive skills of employability as formal learning goals makes their mastery contingent on the actual student population, whose characteristics can only be approximated at a time when core decisions about the instructional design have to be made. Depending on motivation, prior education, personal experience and learning strategy, achievements in these skills will in all likelihood follow a bell curve distribution for a given student cohort. Some will stand out, some will struggle, most will demonstrate average achievements. Plausible as this distribution is, there is no formalized assessment, let alone grading of these skills. Instead, the general assumption is that all graduates of an appropriately rigorous degree program at a sufficiently reputable university will have acquired these skills above a minimum threshold. Their perception in some circles as "soft" is attributable to their viscuous nature, which continues to withstand any attempt to capture them in a "hard" sieve of quantitative indicators. The conventional shorthand for such skill-sets refers to someone as "an educated person", but has fallen apparently out of use for fear of banality.

The IEIW project took this reasoning one step further when it foregrounded competencies of intercultural dialogue among its formal learning goals. Such skills arguably contribute to managerial qualifications in a diverse work environment anywhere, but they are particularly relevant in the polarized settings of the Middle East. Because of their elusive nature, these skills are not usually formally graded past kindergarten age, where categories such as "plays well with others" or "treats others with respect" continue to be part of the feedback roster. In a graduate program for autonomous adults, then, shortcomings in the requisite intercultural skills would not impact a student's ability to complete the program successfully.

The starting point for an understanding of the IEIW learning design is therefore a consideration of its emphasis on the achievement and practice of these skills. They are so prominently bound up in the program's instructional setup that a given student would hardly be able to achieve successful subject-related learning outcomes without having developed them. This process starts with faculty being recruited from a diverse international pool of specialists. This intentionally leads to some unexpected encounters that require the development of intercultural competencies in student-teacher interactions. Some male Palestinian students, for example, needed a good while and the investment of some tangible cognitive efforts before they were able to accept that a female Jewish professor could be a leading expert in Islamic law who could impart a substantial amount of knowledge in an area they had felt supremely familiar with. Similarly, instructional formats actively encourage the development of intercultural dialogue among the student cohort. During most course assignments, students collaborate with each other out of necessity. Correctly teasing apart translations from Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin, to choose the most common example simultaneously serves to reinforce an appreciation of each other's differing and the mutually complementary competencies (and concomitant world views) among the students.

The mediated nature of teaching entailed in e-learning turned out to be quite helpful in these processes of adaptation. Online learning reduces the potential for unfiltered irritation emanating from the social presence of such unfamiliar circumstances in the same physical room. The reduced immediacy of the virtual environment not only creates a protected, neutral space for intercultural learning, one which could also be achieved in a suitable physical room. The mediated nature of such encounters create a virtual space between the participants in an online course, a fact that is often argued as reducing the efficacy of digital distance learning. In this case, however, it facilitates learning because the competencies to be acquired benefit from the mediated setting by making the encounter with an unfamiliar or potentially conflictual situation much less threatening and disturbing.

Leveraging diversity and capturing practices

Normalization of academic disciplines and study degrees dates back to the roots of modern educational systems f the industrial revolution. An ever-increasing body of knowledge and the necessity to organize advanced learning for an ever-growing number of students, along with the social broadening of higher education to include more and more societal groups that were formerly excluded have increased the need for homogeneity in a given learner community. These processes are easily observable in school curricula, where graduates are expected to bring a suitably normalized body of knowledge and skills to the next step of their education. It is easy to recognize these mechanisms as a kind of socially constructed shorthand

to create sufficient homogeneity in a student body. Yet worries and complaints abound that graduates are not sufficiently equipped for learning strategies as university students. In Germany in particular, the prevailing popular and political myth of the high school graduation *(Abitur)* as the universal and indispensable formal qualification for entering a program of academic study persists and has recently become even stronger in light of mass immigration to Europe.

The corresponding standard model of education requires an adequately homogenous frame of reference at the beginning of a unit of learning for all learners, so as to make the uniform learning goals achievable within the defined timeframe and the expected degree of effort. While the latter will vary individually from learner to learner, the variance is considered due to the learners' respective aptitudes and abilities to learn (their learning traits), and their ability to master different learning strategies, including discipline and repetition (their learning skills). The assumption of homogeneity in the student body, then, is a side effect of the much maligned industrial model of higher education.

Notions of diversity challenge this assumption, and the proponents of diversity have emphasized the added benefit for learning communities that comprise different nationalities, cultures and religions with such conviction that it has become a matter of course that a diverse student body is a desirable characteristic of modern universities in the Western mold. Regarding boundaries of culture and religion, we are used to acknowledging both their reality and the possibility of transcending them as false dichotomies. The very presence of these boundaries is also a reminder that changing or ignoring them is much easier said than done.

The diversity argument does not, however, extend to a variance in reference knowledge. Because so much intercultural, interreligious and international reflection and learning take place in a diverse group of learners, demanding the requisite degree of cognitive effort, the apparent need for a homogenous frame of reference knowledge among all learners upon entering the learning unit has become even more prominent. While graduates of the unit will have learned individually about diverse perspectives and approaches, ideally integrating this kind of self-reflected communicative attitude into their own identities, we implicitly expect them to have learned more or less the same regarding subject matter and knowledge. Otherwise, they will receive a failing grade – no matter how much intercultural dialogue they have participated in.

Once we have accepted these benefits of diversity in education and learning, a dilemma immediately presents itself: What if the perceived differences, in culture or religion, say, are so deeply engrained and conflictual that they prevent students from collaborating and instead lead them to conflict? Do the basic preconditions for diverse learning groups entail a fundamental readiness to question or at least relativize the very cultural imprints that would require such a discourse? In other words, does the social creation of a space for intercultural dialogue presuppose a basic willingness to engage in such dialogue from all participants? Diversity by itself is not a guarantor of consensus und cooperation – without normative grounding, a diverse space is easily (ab)used to further estrangement and foster conflict based on precisely those differences among participants it is supposed to overcome.

This dilemma affects not only the formalized aspects of such a venture. In a conventional on-site program, students collaborate and cohabitate on campus. Faculty share office space and jointly attend departmental events. The collective memory of a department or a school accrues informal learning in its collective memory. Novices can ask or simply emulate the seasoned hands and minds to find out what the rules are, what is considered proper and acceptable, where the boundaries and pitfalls are. In the case of an online master program such as the IEIW, the timeframe of the program severely curtails similar processes of peer-learning. Informal practices of students and staff only become social habits based on an actual contiguity of multiple cohorts. If there is no overlap in academic years, the wheel keeps being invented time and time again. Due to the 12-month duration of the program, there was little to no overlap between student cohorts. Faculty was similarly affected, because hardly any instructors were able to commit to teaching two years in a row, so that for every new incoming cohort arriving in the fall, likewise a new slate of lecturers began teaching in the program for the first time.

The program's institutional memory rests with its sole continuous unit, the project team at its core. It became apparent even before the pilot iteration of the academic cycle was completed that a formalization of usually informal educational support practices was necessary for the faculty, especially regarding the digitally supported and mediated formats unfamiliar to many of them. It became equally clear that similar strategies were needed to make the collective lessons and experiences of previous years available to incoming students.

A conscious decision was therefore made to devote project team resources to scaffolding for the learning process. These activities existed in a gray zone, not amounting to actual teaching, but clearly exceeding the tasks of mere administration. At the beginning of each academic cycle, an explicit phase of on-boarding was implemented to allow students to familiarize themselves with the academic "rules of the game" expected of them, and to allow for reflection and mediation on the intercultural frictions to be expected within the student cohort. A handbook for best practices of digital teaching was created for faculty. Continuous tutoring by professional academics in geographic proximity

played an important additional role, especially during the distance phases of instruction, so as to effectively address both questions regarding subject matters as well as the skill-set of digital literacies necessary to successfully navigate the online classroom.

Expected value and recruiting

The properties of the IEIW Master Degree interdisciplinary subject matter, the implications of its cross-cultural methodology and the international academic community presupposed that a sufficient number of individual students would be both interested and qualified to apply for program participation each year. The academic program thus inherited a performative challenge, in the sense that ideal applicants for successful participation in the program would possess at the outset a key skill expected of its alumni, namely a strong desire to continuously improve their volition and aptitude for intercultural dialogue.

It became clear in the course of the program that some expectations about the target audience had to be substantially corrected. The majority of applicants and participants, mainly on the Palestinian/Arab side, were not so much recent undergraduates looking to continue their academic education, but more likely to be professionals with substantial employment experience, including management positions. The average age of participants has proven to be significantly higher than originally envisioned, between 33 and 35 years old. The majority of program alumni are employed in positions that do not formally require a master's degree as qualification.

The age differences and divergent professional backgrounds are an unintended additional dimension of diversity in the student cohort. From the perspective of faculty, the varied composition of each cohort poses substantive challenges for the development of course syllabi and teaching styles that have little to do with the intercultural aspects of the program but require additional effort to be properly addressed. On the other hand, the unexpected additional degree of diversity is an immense resource as it brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to course assignments and student discussions. During the course of the program, it has positively impacted the alumni network as well, which, though small in absolute numbers, boasts multifarious institutional connections that aid job-seeking students just as much as PhD applicants.

In terms of the formal indicators of the project grant, this result seems to suggest that criteria for professional training and career qualifications were insufficiently met. From a perspective of conventional project management, a lack of sufficiently qualified applicants from the intended target cohort of junior academics and young professionals in their late twenties, mostly the participants from countries in the "Western" hemisphere, can be interpreted either as a sign of insufficient marketing and ineffective communication or, more fundamentally, as a deficit in market research when ascertaining the actual interest in the program and its subject matter. With the pilot nature of the project in mind, however, it is easily discernible that the initial iterations of the program constituted what would commonly be referred to as market research and that it had furthermore projected an assumption of career trajectories in Germany and Western Europe onto the target region.

Both labor market conditions and educational traditions in Germany lead a majority of students who commence a master degree program to do so consecutively, that is, immediately or soon after completing their bachelor's degree. Even if they gather practical employment experience in the interval, it is often not yet in pursuit of a steady career goal, but to "test the waters" of one or several fields of potential interest. Within these educational systems, such a decision is reasonable from their point of view, because the post-Bologna bachelor's degree is not (yet) associated with the same amount of academic and cultural capital as its historic predecessors, the *Magister Artium* or *Diplom*, especially when it comes to ambitious high-potentials.

Corresponding with this mindset is the prevalent practice for employers to specify a master's degree as the formal requirement for corresponding positions with lower and middle management occupations. In a labor market where the first academic degree is awarded to such a high percentage of high school graduates so as to be no longer a sufficiently clear indicator of the necessary skills, the master's degree is an efficient threshold to more easily identify qualified candidates.

The international compatibility of degrees, one of the main goals of the Bologna reforms, creates this interchangeability as intended, but the result remains somewhat ambiguous. Easily obscured are the underlying cultural patterns of education and employment that form the cultural context of these degrees and define their meanings, which can be highly context specific. In much of the Anglo-Saxon world, for example, the relationship between a bachelor and a master degree education is quite different in the sense that an undergraduate education is considered less of an academic or disciplinary specialization *(Ausbildung)* and places a stronger emphasis on acquiring a well-rounded personality *(Bildung)*.

In many parts of the Southern hemisphere, where the opportunities for access to higher education (and the corresponding advanced positions in the labor market) are much more circumscribed than in Western Europe, a much lower

percentage of a given cohort receives an undergraduate degree, so it follows that the degree's social valuation tends to be proportionally higher.

Given the precarious employment options of fragile contexts, it is first of all plausible to leverage an undergraduate degree initially into the pursuit of a career path. It is equally plausible that secondary academic degrees – with the possible exception of MBAs – will be pursued primarily by students interested in academic careers or professional academic fields such as medicine or engineering. This in turn leads to the observation that a number of even advanced employment positions with substantial managerial tasks do not specify a formal master's degree as a necessary qualification, especially in a context of fragility where individual experience, cultural familiarity or traditional bonds of community and family may significantly outweigh disciplinary education.

Turning back to the perspective of prospective students, their view of the IEIW program offering appears quite different from what its founders and funders had originally intended. The added benefit of a second academic degree is a worthwhile investment from the targeted student's point of view only when sufficiently steady employment has allowed for an accumulation of professional experience, enabling an individual to feel secure enough in the probability of regaining a position later. This tension played an important role in developing suitable strategies for the program's marketing and recruiting.

4. Cycling and re-cycling hypotheses

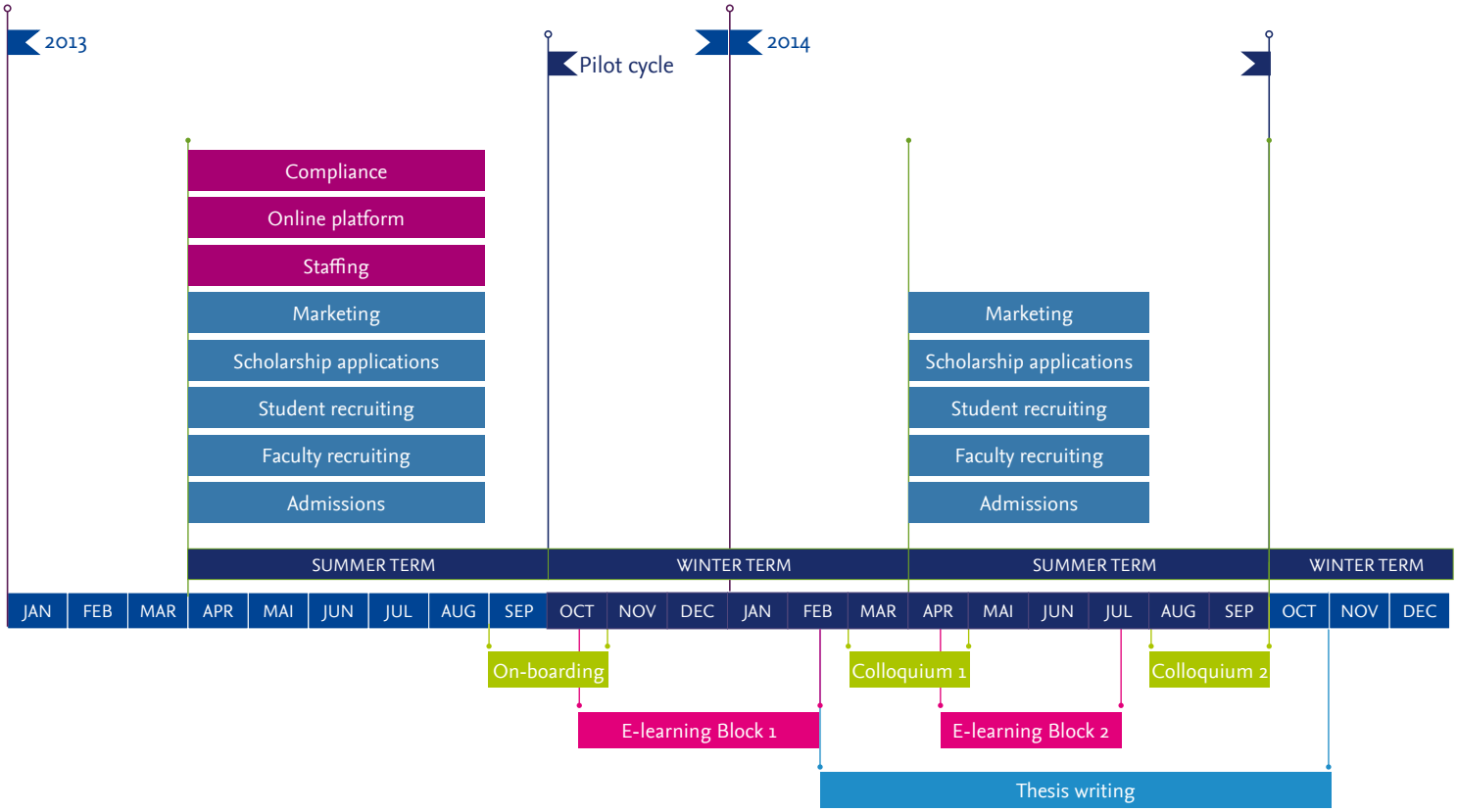

Figure 9. Ramp-up for the program pilot rests on hypotheses to be verified.

Introduction: Administrating complexity

Up to twenty Israeli, Palestinian and German students have enrolled in the Master Degree program "Intellectual Encounters of the Islamicate World" within the Department of History and Cultural Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin (FUB) each fall from September 2013 onward. They applied and were selected to study the history of thought in the Islamicate world from the medieval era to early modern times for the duration of two semesters according to the standard academic calendar.

The specific focus on the scholarly exchanges and collaborations between representatives of Christianity, Judaism and Islam required previous undergraduate experience in a related field. English has been the language of instruction as teaching and guidance have been provided by a renowned international faculty. Students have examined the interwoven intellectual roots of these monotheist religions in the areas of theology and exegesis, philosophy and logic, law, mystical traditions and the history of science during a 12-month course of study.

In contrast to most theological or historic-philological research on this subject, the program is premised on an interreligious perspective and transdisciplinary methods. It is grounded in an emergent field of research, aiming to unearth the profound connections between three world religions at a time when their familiar modern characteristics were much less established. A key objective of the field is to supply historic foundations for contemporary religious tolerance and dialogue by making commonalities in religious tradition evident and improving mutual understanding.

The master program emphasizes rigorous academic standards and practicein hands-on research, requiring

a working knowledge of Arabic for the examination of historic sources. The student body is chosen for its cultural and religious diversity so as to reinforce the importance of an interreligious perspective effectively and encourage multiple viewpoints on the subject matter. Students can therefore develop and exercisecapabilities in intercultural dialogue both in their research and in collaboration with their fellow students. The program seeks to create a protected space for students to undertake unfamiliar intercultural encounters, far removed from the tensions of contemporary political conflict.

The program is offered as distance-learning in a blended learning format to encourage applicants from a broad range of backgrounds. Around 80% of instruction over the course of two semesters takes place via synchronous online seminars using Adobe Connect™. Asynchronous learning has been possible via a digital classroom that was implemented in a project-administered instance of the popular Moodle™ LMS in the summer of 2018 and has since then been migrated to the Blackboard™ LMS as part of the university's overall IT strategy.

Three on-site colloquia frame the e-learning phases. Students and instructors meet for a two-week research colloquium in Berlin at the program's mid-point in February and at the conclusion of the teaching phase in August, before students begin writing their theses. A one-week workshop for on-boarding the incoming students is conducted in September, in a location symbolic for interreligious exchange. Most recently this orientation week was held in Córdoba, Spain; previous events took place in Istanbul, Turkey, until security reasons made the location untenable.

The IEIW Master Degree was a pilot project for improved higher education access in politically and economically fragile contexts, based on unique stakeholder cooperation to experiment with digital learning technologies. The IEIW program charges students no tuition fees whatsoever; travel expenses for the on-site events are covered for Israeli and Palestinian students. In addition to these travel allowances, Palestinian students especially may also apply for a scholarship to cover living expenses for the duration of the program. The project sponsor and supervisor has been the nonprofit agency charged with international academic exchange and cooperation, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD e.V.). It is remarkable that this decidedly academic program formed the heart of a project for regional economic development, made possible by funding awarded by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) from 2013 to 2019. From a development perspective, the four successive project grants have contributed to efforts in the Middle East peace process with the master degree's focus on intercultural dialogue as a learning goal for its alumni. Economic development in the region has been supported by broadening access to state-of-the-art graduate studies for future professionals.

Although describing the program concisely requires six paragraphs, in hindsight its features exhibit a remarkable degree of organic coherence. The snug fit between strategic goals and operational practices risks obscuring the underlying administrative complexity. This section therefore offers a perspective from program inception on. It outlines the processes that were necessary to launch the program pilot successfully and that have been necessary to operate subsequent steady-state iterations from the standpoint of a project manager. To operationalize funder intentions, the shape and structure of the project design became intensely familiar with the consequences of exposure to a fragile context. A key aspect of hosting the program at FUB was this ability to engage in "double-loop" learning (Argyris, 1991) to maintain the balance of strategic continuity and iterative change.

Minimum viable pilot to validate assumptions

The trade-off between the political goal of access to intercultural training and the academic goal of excellence is palpable in the challenges for marketing the program and recruiting applicants. In terms of regional development, practical parameters regarding benefactors hadto be considered. The program required students to possess a working knowledge of Arabic, but the working language for teaching and learning was English. A set of skills related to academic background and research practice in a prior undergraduate program was necessary and had to be complemented by high motivation for self-regulated study and the willingness to engage in intercultural exchange. This set the bar quite high for applicants.

In spite of its excellent academic reputation and intensive marketing efforts, including an annual trip to the region with on-campus events in the relevant departments, the number of suitable applicants in the early iterations of the project remained lower than anticipated. Among the most efficient tools for successful recruiting were personal recommendations of instructors, current students and program alumni on the one hand, as well as digital communication via web sites, social media and similar channels. Although actual demand for the program existed, understanding the features of the project continued to pose a significant hurdle in the marketing process.

Once students had enrolled, intercultural frictions on the participant side were expected as a systematic challenge to be addressed within the program, due to the diversity inherent in the program parameters. But the fragile context of the Middle East exacerbated some of these discrepancies into veritable obstacles already during the marketing

and recruitment process, both for individual students and organizational stakeholders. Should the course website be made in English only, for example, since fluent English was required for course participation? Or would an Arabic version add credibility and clarity to the program's intended audience? But this would have necessitated a version in Hebrew and in German as well, to demonstrate the balanced approach of the program. Questions such as these became relevant in light of limited available resources and in-house skills for maintaining multi-language communications over time. They also entailed the risk of raising the wrong kind of visibility among competitors or outright opponents of such intercultural efforts. Thus, in spite of the multitude of digital marketing channels available, the need for targeted and sometimes discreet communication within fragile contexts was a strong argument for continued reliance on personal connections and conventional printed matter such as flyers and brochures to reach the potential Palestinian target audience especially.

As in any higher education intervention, the pilot run was supposed to test some basic assumptions and to provide a proof-of-concept for continued operation. Nevertheless, some pragmatic trade-offs have had to be made in light of the multiple considerations in play. For the testing of the key hypotheses, in other words, not all parameters of the pilot had to be fully formed. It was more effective to apply the design perspective of a *minimum viable product* (MVP) to the pilot and, with only the barest of required expenditures, test for the one hypothesis that would help determine the strategic viability of the entire project (Moogk, 2012; J. Münch et al., 2013).

In the case of the IEIW Master Degree, it was plain to see that this key feature would have to be related to the achievement of intercultural learning goals. Could the the East-Western Divan Orchestra's mechanism of joint focus on a demanding activity to overcome politico-cultural fault lines be replicated in a graduate academic program? Could a sufficient number of suitable applicants with the requisite disciplinary and social skills be identified and successfully shepherded through a one-year program of online learning with verifiable improvements in their intercultural competencies? In retrospect it can be easily forgottenretrospect that the answers to these questions were anyything but self-evident in 2013. Moreover, if the pilot could not provide positive answers, all other efforts of the team regarding technological innovation, supremely qualified faculty and employability of graduates could not save the program from a fundamental miscalculation.

Testing this key assumption behind the learning design in a minimum viable pilot was thus existential for any further investments in the project design. With the MVP approach came an inevitable corollary, however, which would likely have been apparent to anyone familiar with the launch of an educational program, namely a one-time trade-off in academic quality. If decisions have to be made about what constitutes minimum viability, resources must obviously be held back in some other areas of the pilot that may be added later. Thus, while academicic standards of excellence were an indispensable strategic property of the IEIW project, they were impossible to manufacture and predict *ex ante.*

Faculty and curriculum can facilitate their emergence even during a pilot iteration, but the incoming student body in all their glorious diversity represented an unknown quantity of significant impact. What kinds of knowledge would they bring, what deficits would have to be compensated for? What kind of motivational or didactic issues would have to be addressed? What administrative problems would emerge if such a variegated student body was enrolled at FUB simultaneously? These questions would determine the internal qualities of the learning design, and they were impossible to answer until the pilot was underway. Nevertheless, if the desired academic standards – in student papers, for example – were not achieved on the initial pilot run of the program with the help of serendipitous circumstances, the downside would be minimal. As long as the MVP hypotheses regarding the intercultural learning could be validated, it would be much easier to hone quality standards over time in future iterations, more so because future applicants would have a reference case on which they would be able to gauge their expectations and suitability for the program.

Student marketing, recruiting and commitment

For students to successfully apply, enroll and complete the program, their expectations, incentives and handicaps as determined by the fragile local conditions were to be identified and addressed with a high degree of adaptability. On the provider side in Germany, however, a densely regulated environment and a highly institutionalized system of higher education limited the available innovation space. The program therefore needed an administrative support system, whose procedures could initially buffer conflicting demands and optimize them iteratively over the duration of the entire program.

Applying to a graduate program of study is a life choice with significant opportunity costs, so for potential students, it amounts to a multi-stage process of decision-making commonly modeled as phases of attention, interest, desire, and action (AIDA)[11]. During each phase of this process, applicants make a selection between several alternatives and must be presented with a corresponding value proposition that can help them narrow down their

preferences and make a decision. In the evolving marketing strategy of the project, targeted efforts were made to address each phase with corresponding measures. Questions of strategic communications beyond the immediate marketing and recruiting needs for the IEIW program played a crucial role in effectively proving existing learner demand, both during the pilot phase and the later iterations.

Innovators everywhere face similar challenges. Precisely because it offers something new, different, and unconventional, it is difficult to frame a program's relevance and value in the established categories of an established field. In the case of the IEIW, the actual complexity of the project involving stakeholder cooperation, the multiple learning and development goals, an interdisciplinary research perspective, and the specially designed blended learning curriculum were all necessary ingredients for the successful launch of the program. For the intended audience, however, these same features made it difficult to understand the value and the format of the program. For recruiting the pilot cohort of students, this was especially challenging, because applicants would have to place their trust in a program with no prior reference points.

Generally speaking, a lack of program reputation can be compensated to a certain degree by the institutional reputation of the host university. But in this case, it was clear to the founders that especially the recruitment of Palestinian students would have to rely on personal networks and word of mouth, not just in the pilot year but probably during subsequent iterations as well. The features contributing to the fragility of their livelihoods would necessarily impede both the overall demand for such a program and the individual value proposition associated with such a commitment that carried immense opportunity costs but little in terms of immediate pay-off.

Assuming that academic supervisors and faculty created a suitable learning design, a host of issues remained in dealing with the administrative tasks involved in the successful launch and continued operation of the initial cycle, all of which were characterized by a high degree of fundamental uncertainty. As in any innovative endeavor, there were some glitches to be expected and some wrinkles to iron out. These are typically more difficult to recognize and to address in an interdisciplinary online setting, where feedback is mediated and often time-delayed, and frames of reference differ due to multiple disciplinary backgrounds. Project management is made more challenging still, when the intercultural dimension of translation and decoding becomes involved.

The diversity that is necessary and desirable in the IEIW learning design manifests itself on the level of administrative workflows, where standardization and routines are the expected norm, especially where they interface with the university environment of FUB or the institutional expectations of external funders. Finally, the fact that fragile contexts are involved raises the stakes substantially and reduces administrative margins of error. Student tolerance for delays and faults in solving administrative questions is significantly lower than in conventional programs, since such questions can immediately impact their financial and legal base for program participation.

The short cycle of the program requires substantial and reliable commitments from administrators, instructors and students up front. After the highly selective application process is complete, all three groups therefore share strong incentives to maximize their utility. If a student is admitted, but does not complete the program, real cost is incurred on all sides – no matter whether the cause was an early drop-out (which has been successfully avoided throughout the project duration) or failure to complete all graduation requirements (which has been successfully avoided in all but a few exceptional situations). These scenarios pose a real threat, not only because of the waste of resources and opportunity. Because of the important role diversity plays for the student cohort in each program iteration, losing even one student would have the direct consequence of diminishing the carefully balanced intercultural learning context for the remaining student cohort. The project team is therefore responsible for collecting the participants' accumulated experiences during each academic program cycle and, where possible, using them as the building blocks for strategically viable routines in subsequent cycles.

Inherent in both the strategic and the operational perspectives is a strong orientation toward the specific demand of benefactors, namely the student audience whose expectations are shaped by fragile contexts as well as demands for compatible outcomes embedded in the institutional framework on each side of the intercultural cooperation. The resulting tasks for the project team have necessarily expanded far beyond the usual scope of learning support and program administration. The team's function as the main channel for services and collective knowledge of the host university, means that it has been perceived by both students and faculty as the interface for a host of issues (such as digital literacies, career advice, psychological counseling, financial services, legal advice, health services, and travel management) that are normally provided by specialized university departments. As part of their commitment, project staff have therefore been obliged to acquire necessary expertise beyond their original skill-set and assume a variety of unfamiliar roles to effectively interact with both the program participants and the surrounding organizational environment.

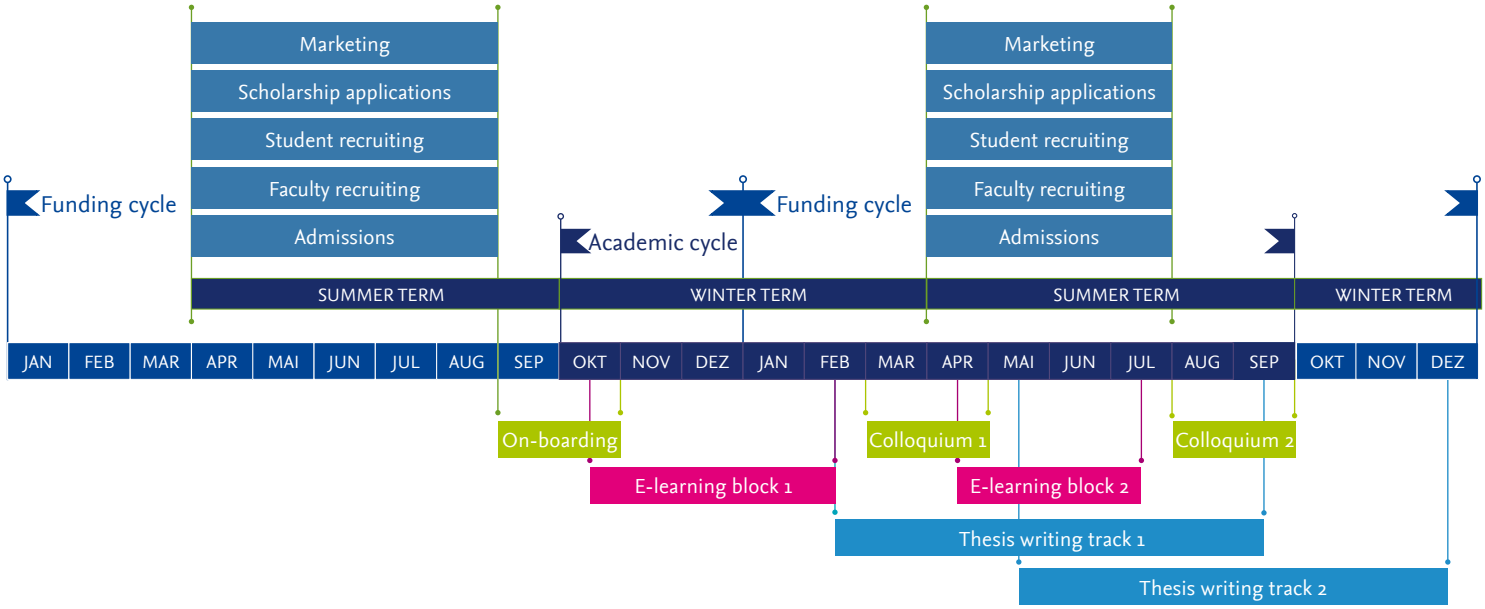

Figure 10. Steady-state operations of the program yield data points for adaptation.

Flexibility for continuous adjustment

During the creation, launch and repeated iterations of a new educational format, a significant shift in focus occurs. The pilot iteration of the program also creates performative points of reference, however, where previously there was only an empty space of projection and intuition. The initial investment to launch and operate a successful pilot amortizes over several years. Structures established on the basis of an informed guess may be stabilized; processes improvised become routines to be optimized on the basis of actual experience.

An example is the timing of thesis-writing and program graduation. It was originally envisioned that the students would write their thesis during the summer term, parallel to the second set of modules. This proved too challenging for the majority of participants in terms of workload. For the cohorts from the second iteration forward, a two-track system was introduced that permits students to complete their thesis within three months following the completion of the course phase. Of course, this created a new problem concerning the graduation ceremony taking place at the end of the third on-site colloquium. Allowing students to extend the thesis-writing period after the second semester ended meant that they would not have actually completed the degree requirement on the scheduled day of the ceremony and no diploma could be handed to them.

The compromise solution was pragmatic and Salomonic at the same time: The ceremony itself, as anyone who has attended it can confirm, is an intensely emotional event that celebrates the cohesiveness in diversity that the students have acquired over the course of the year. It pertains, in other words, to intercultural learning as much if not more than to the formal aspect of credit points and the graduation certificate. With an emphasis on the ceremonial aspect, the soon-to-be-alumni have the opportunity to celebrate their individual and shared achievements while enjoying each other's immediate presence. It is only afterwards that many of them embark on the more lonely task of writing their thesis to hand in for the proper Master Degree credentials issued by the university.

Furthermore, a number of assumptions regarding student relations could be corrected with experiences from the initial pilot cohort. During the first year, Palestinian students were provided with their own laptops, on the assumption that they would not otherwise be able to access the online classroom and participate in digital interaction. This perceived inequality between participants created palpable dissatisfaction within the student cohort. The pilot iteration revealed that nearly all Palestinian participants were equipped with suitable devices of their own. Lack of technical infrastructure on the students' side, it turned out, was a minor problem at most. Indeed, some of the lecturers brought hardware to the program that was older and occasionally more problematic to use for online classes than the hardware the students themselves owned. A crucial resource

throughout the program, however, was technical support for the setup and configuration of laptops for students and faculty alike. The project's IT administrator regularly spent a significant amount of time supporting various hardware models and operating systems with software installation and troubleshooting far above and beyond the regular service levels that a university's central IT department is generally able to offer its students. Here again, it turned out that on-site availability of expertise and capacities for immediate support contributed much more significantly to the smooth operation of online classes than any investment in hardware or software infrastructure.

A similarly unequal distribution of program resources had to do with travel expenses for on-site events. Based on academic qualities, topical focus and intercultural exchange, program participation did offer an attractive proposition for potential students of medieval history who actually resided in Germany. The online elements of the curriculum meant that not only local students living in Berlin, but indeed students from all of Germany could participate. Due to funding made available with a designation for development purposes abroad, though, it was formally impossible to offer an attractive value proposition for university students of the subject within Germany, unless they happened to reside in or near Berlin. The project proposal had emphasized from the very beginnings the important role that the participation of German students would play in the project, both as mediators in intercultural dialogue and as future researchers for a notoriously underrepresented field. Nevertheless, it proved difficult to recruit German students for the IEIW program, because of a completely different incentive structure in the "stable context" of German higher education, where the potential target audience has numerous choices for university study without tuition and tend to prefer on-site learning to an online program. Because IEIW program funds originated in the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), they were earmarked for exclusive disbursal to foreign citizens. As a result, German students as a rule could not be compensated for travel expenses to the on-site events in Berlin, Istanbul and Còrdoba.

Such expenditures might appear as reasonable investments in the context of substantial tuition fees, but the expectations (and budgets) of German master students, immersed in an educational system where no such tuition fees exist, perceive such spending as an extravagance. As an informal and largely unanticipated solution, Israeli and Palestinian students regularly invited the accompanying international students to share their hotel rooms with them. Hotel staff was made aware in advance of such arrangements and proved willing to accommodate all such situations without complications. While this anecdote makes for an inspiring example of pragmatic intercultural solidarity which, in project terminology at any rate, contributes to desirable learning outcomes, it should be noted that such a solution would have been impossible to propose by the project's administrative staff nor could it have been condoned by the compliance departments of funding agencies. Less mundane matters were on the minds of program initiators when they referred in the original IEIW project proposal to "emergent progress in mutual respect by approximation" of the students.

A related point regarding the absence of tuition fees further impacts the ability to recruit students from Germany to participate in the program. In the "stable context" of German higher education, the added value of a high-end graduate degree with no associated tuition costs is difficult to perceive as such for most domestic students, since undergraduate and graduate education in the public university system does not generally require such tuition to be paid. A much more salient point to these students is therefore the high degree of specialization and the Arabic language skills requirements, which tend to amplify difficulties in recruiting from the German landscape.

5. Balancing stakeholder relationships

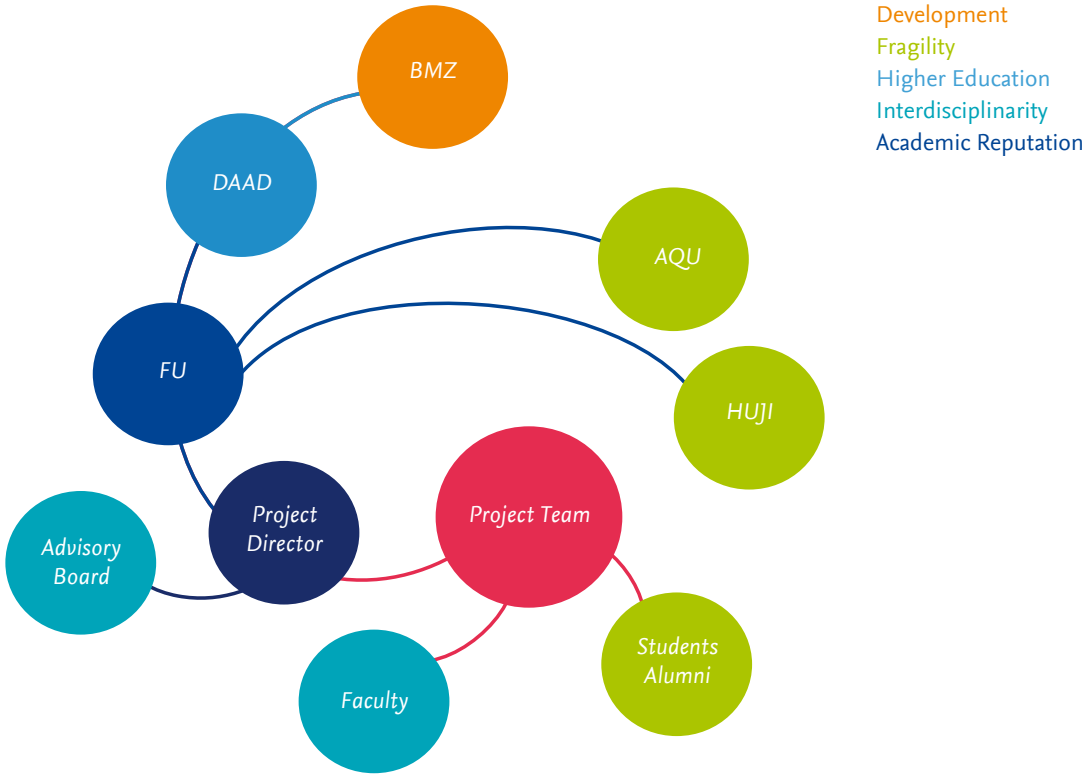

Figure 11. Stakeholder expectations reflect conditions in their respective context.

Introduction: Negotiating stakeholders agendas

Reflecting the multi-facetted expectations for the IEIW project was the complex web of interdependent stakeholder relationships within the German higher education and development landscape, which has sustained and monitored the IEIW project throughout its lifetime. This organizational framework of stakeholders is highly institutionalized, densely regulated and structurally conservative to the point that systemic innovation – whether it be pedagogic, digital, administrative or otherwise – faces a solid amount of institutional inertia if not outright active resistance. This intertia is, in other words, the opposite of fragile.

A tripartite set of criteria was defined for the master program's long-term impact. It was intended to foster the internationalization of its host university (FUB), it was to contribute solutions to regionally specific challenges in the fragile context, specifically the Middle East conflict, and it was to align with sustainable development goals in the region. These measurable outcomes were to be achieved primarily through the active participation of program graduates in reducing intercultural conflicts and tensions, both in their professional and private lives.

Project funding has been provided by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), by way of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) as the administrative and supervisory organization for allocating funds and monitoring progress, with the Federal Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt, AA) providing some informal initial support for the emergent tripartite partnership among the universities involved. These organizations and their respective positions in the overall landscape of higher education and development efforts in Germany must be considered as strategic stakeholders in all project outcomes, in light of their different agendas and corresponding indicators for success.

These varied stakeholders on a federal level each pursue overlapping, but ultimately different agendas. The State Department brings a wealth of experience in the region and a long-term perspective on the peace process to the table. An opportunity to support activities in higher education for Palestinians has been a welcome corollary to its usual programs, aiding the development of local civil society structures parallel to the usual diplomatic and state channels. The Ministry of Development, with the main focus on regional development, likewise has embraced the opportunity to extend its reach into the fragile Palestinian context among others. An alignment with higher education initiatives in the region has brought a possible addition to its existing programs for professional and vocational training.

As the main federal stakeholder for funding and oversight of international higher education programs, the DAAD is not only the natural partner for distribution of funds and supervision of the project. It is itself keen to explore the potential of digitization and uses of educational technologies to further its mission, increase internationalization, and facilitate student and researcher mobility. Leveraging these technologies would allow the DAAD to more effectively reach target audiences in the higher education sphere, which so far had remained outside of its necessarily state-bound reach, due to fragile conditions in the target country.

Imagine for a moment the overall IEIW project in its actual, current design as a regular on-site program hosted at FUB or a similar institution. In this on-site version of the MA program, the diverging agendas of underwriters, stakeholders, administrators and participants as described above would still apply in a more or less unchanged manner. Taking this premise as a starting point, the development of blended learning solutions for educational programs aimed at teaching not just disciplinary expertise, but also general cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, highlights yet again an instrumental view of technology. The focus is now on those pedagogical and instructional practices that can be identified as functions of the technologically mediated design of the program.

The issues resulting from divergent strategic goals on an operational level require a continued optimization of alignment among stakeholder agendas, priorities and criteria. Like any cooperation, these are relationship commitments that demand compromises from all sides for an optimal outcome. Aside from their operational tasks, the project team has had to continuously engage in macro-level organizational relations and stakeholder management with a dual challenge. This engagement has meant balancing the expectations emanating from a robust, densely regulated educational landscape in Germany with the fragile contexts of their university partners and students. At the same time, the organizational issues of compliant administrative workflows, notoriously labor-intensive on their own, also have had to be communicated sensibly across intercultural boundaries so as to suitably address the respective recipients. This section contrasts the two organizational frameworks and describes the negotiation tactics required to maintain a sufficiently flexible space of administrative action for the project team.

Outcome evaluation and incentive structures

The IEIW project was to establish an internationally visible graduate program of top-tier academic quality (“excellence”). Alumni were to be qualified for successful professional careers in the field of intercultural dialogue (“training”) and participate actively in local and international structures engaging in such dialogue (“networks”). Finally, students and instructors participating in the program were to maintain long-term alumni relationships with the hosting university in Berlin (“internationalization”).

In accordance with the guidelines of the funding agencies, the project proposal defined four main goals as criteria for impact and success. The initial target audience were outstanding undergraduate degree-holders in medieval theology or related fields in Germany, Israel, and the Palestinian territories who were interested in a graduate degree program to further their careers as academic researchers or advanced professionals.

In order to have a practical impact on the post-graduate lives of its alumni, an educational program must provide not only for successful learning outcomes but also validate them with the corresponding legitimacy of symbolic academic capital. Especially in a subject matter such as medieval cultural history, where the skills acquired in the degree process are somewhat intangible and unfold over time, it is crucial to address the symbolic dimension of higher education and provide solid credentials that will be accepted and valued in the students’ local contexts after completion of the program. A strong emphasis on academic excellence in applicant selection, faculty recruiting and assessment of learning outcomes is therefore a crucial component to program success. Studying intellectual discourses of the medieval era thus creates benefits for both individual participants and the broader region, whether students pursue academic or nonacademic careers after completing their degree.

The additional workload this creates in a third-party funded project concerns transparency and evaluation cycles. There is an existential requirement to evaluate results so as to be able to apply for contingency funding. Once operations are somewhat reliable, resources can be devoted to

the strategic task of project continuation. Stakeholders on the German side needed to know that the project aligned with their frameworks of evaluation and impact monitoring. Regular quality assurance reports and a thorough evaluation of project outcomes in accordance with a catalogue of impact indicators captured outcomes and impact according to detailed criteria specified within the original grant.

By all accounts of these results, the project has been successful. In terms of achieving the intended learning goals, student surveys and external evaluations have proven conclusively that skills for intercultural dialogue and conflict resolution were effectively developed for all participant cohorts. Less clear is the impact of these qualifications on the professional development of program graduates to leadership qualities and executive career positions. Reliably measuring this kind of effectiveness is a familiar problem of leadership trainings more generally, because their application is discernible only in the medium or long term and requires corresponding follow-up studies among alumni.

The performative quality of these administrative workflows and their related practices is crucial to recognize. When dealing with "wicked" problems that are not restricted to one field of expertise, one particular location or population, the complexity of environmental variables makes it impossible to gauge the impact of emergent practices. To succeed with this approach, the required mindset needs to be attuned to the gradual evolution of the design process and project scope being shaped simultaneously. Project milestones develop through multiple iterations of the program, and are best understood as snapshots that contribute significantly to current understandings of each problem's shape and scope. It just so happens that this mindset resembles nothing so much as the academic approach and the methodological toolkit of the sciences in general and of the humanities in particular, where discursive practices are considered powerful tools in shaping research questions and findings.

The underlying rationale for these activities draws on a particular understanding of educational responsibility embedded in the learning design. Once a student has been accepted into the program, strong incentives exist for all stakeholders that she complete it successfully. An early dropout or a failure to graduate signifies wasted resources both in terms of project funds and in terms of the student's material and opportunity costs. Developing a curriculum sensitive to these incentives invariably faces contradictions inherent in the multiple overlapping program goals, though. Following the logic of educational goals, a continuously high graduation rate is taken as an indicator of program success. Increasing graduation rates by lowering the academic quality is obviously undesirable and unacceptable, because it would damage the program's reputation and attractiveness.

In contrast, the logic of development goals is geared towards providing access and the successful development of intercultural skills for the broadest possible audience at the lowest possible cost, to achieve sustainability and self-sufficiency. A highly selective recruitment process as implied by state-of-the-art academic standards contradicts this expectation. Furthermore, from this perspective, the absolute number of successful graduates with a master's degree is a much more viable indicator for success than the graduation rate.

From the perspective of project design, the initial decisions regarding program parameters formalized in the original grant proposal point to an important quality in the working conditions of managers and administrators in the project team. The goal set imposed by the external stakeholders, which were the conditions of continued funding and, in turn, of employment for project staff, define the criteria for project success, and thus these goals create their own environment of precariousness and insecurity on an operational level. To be clear, this does not by any means amount to equating the fragility of the Middle Eastern context with the comparatively comfortable working conditions within a large German university. Following the principle of *requisite variety* (Ashby, 1958), this is simply intended to highlight a quality of the project framework that enabled project staff to better address issues emanating from the fragile context they were dealing with.

It became quite tangible during the project runtime that a certain degree of uncertainty and informality on the provider side was not only desirable, but amounted to a necessary condition for its continued existence. It was helpful, even necessary, for continued compatibility with the fragility of institutions, organizations and individuals in the Middle East and the Muslim hemisphere beyond.

Admissions policy and graduation rates

A fundamental problem in the assessment tools of higher education is that it is somewhat ill-equipped to properly gauge, in a manner that can be vouchsafed, various degrees of mastery and self-sufficiency in the skill-set of critical thinking, self-discipline, and leadership qualities that are lumped together under the term of employability. To a certain degree, their mastery is performative in the sense that instructors, administrators and fellow students are, over time, able to assess in individual participants progress along a continuum of gradually acquiring, honing, practicing, and fine-tuning these skills.

This element of education, however, is hardly captured in the credential the student receives upon successful gradu-

ation, because leadership skills in the broadest sense of the word (encompassing expertisein such aspects as intercultural dialogue and self-discipline) are not graded and transcend individual disciplines. The challenge, then, is how to communicate an alumni's skills in these dimensions to the outside world in a manner that cannot be easily feigned by others who have not in fact achieved this kind of mastery.

Recognizing the importance of such skills is not a recent discovery, but a distinctly modern problem is the systematic shortcoming of academic credentials in this regard. Traditional mechanisms of restricting higher education access to social elites implied that the completion of an academic degree was itself sufficient proof of an individual's personal and professional suitability for dealing with and leading others. This approach can be traced from contemporary systems of higher education at least back to the medieval canon of the seven *artes liberales,* whose mastery signaled an individual's status as a free and autonomous citizen.

Modern higher education programs have a much stronger focus on disciplinary subject matter and, broadly speaking, adhere to meritocratic, egalitarian criteria for access. Yet the function of their degrees persists as a proxy variable for not merely disciplinary expertise, but performance and action competence, an available repertoire of effective learning strategies and at least the potential for leadership positions.

To accommodate the greater number and variety of graduates, the role of grading has become of increasing importance so as to distinguish between their different qualities and achievements. The second dimension is the hierarchy of degrees, where successful completion of the dissertation or even habilitation is now considered the minimum qualification for certain prestigious positions, where once a bachelor's degree might have sufficed.

A third dimension available to confer this kind of distinction upon graduates is institutional reputation – of a certain program, a certain department or a certain university – of providing "outstanding" higher education. Ironically, the Bologna reforms effectively implied that one ECTS credit point was just as good as any other, creating a fully convertible currency of higher education whose units can be combined no matter whether they were awarded in Madrid, Milano, Maastricht or Munich.

This spirit found its more recent technological embodiment in the corresponding use of the blockchain to record these credit points as incremental learning achievements in an inviolable ledger beyond the reach of counterfeiters. These efforts overlook a development that stands in stark contrast to the modularization of individual learning units, namely the concomitant stratification and differentiation of the university landscape. Neither grades achieved nor subject matter studied have as much predictive value for future career trajectories as the credentials imbued by the reputation of a certain university. Witness the spread of rankings, the growth of investment into higher education marketing and brand-building, the ever more prevalent language of competition, positioning and profiling as well as increasingly selective admissions procedures.

Even before contemporary activities of higher education marketing, it was a common and widely accepted approach for institutions of higher education to carefully select those students they admit to their programs. A number of social demographic criteria may play a role in putting together the desired student body, but one would hardly criticize universities for selecting especially those students who have shown the general aptitude, motivation or skill set predisposing them to the learning journey on which they are about to embark. Selection for these characteristics does not qualify as selection bias, but as part of regular admissions procedures.

It is understood that admissions criteria limit access to higher education, because a certain substance of prerequisite knowledge is a necessary condition for successful completion of the program. For the IEIW Master Degree, the imperative of academic excellence meant that the admissions process had to be quite stringent and to include. for example, a working knowledge of Arabic, due to the methodological requirements of study. These requirements created a rather narrow corridor for participation and made recruitment in an already niche community quite a challenge.

None of these conditions could be lowered, however, as they were not only an integral part of the program's design, but also preconditions for the stated goal of international visibility based on academic rigor. Viewed from the organizational perspective of the partner universities, however, these formal standards of scholarly excellence could – in a competitive higher education landscape – easily be perceived as a strategy to poach promising undergraduate students from the region via academic brain drain.

An entirely different logic applies to the political dimension of the project, where the overriding goal is to enable access to as broad a constituency as possible, not necessarily distributed based on merit, but based on need and marginalization. Where educational programs have an admissions process, political projects have an entirely different set of selection criteria for the audience of intended benefactors. Within the political and development logic, the criteria for success are therefore quite differently understood, because in political terms a viable foray into fragile contexts amounts to providing a protected space for intercultural sensitization and the practice of dialogue across entrenched identities.

Agile management in peripheral positions

The IEIW project is an example for the use of agile practices of entrepreneurial organizing at the periphery of a robust, institutionalized system such as German higher education. The disciplinary specificities of its subject matter illustrate the innovative potential of technology-enhanced learning in an academic context. Marginal as the topic of medieval religious history may seem at first glance, the implementation of the IEIW program represents more than a mere virtualization of existing analogue pedagogic practices and a move towards methods and concepts of natively digital humanities.

Cooperative ventures with such a degree of complexity can yield valuable insights for the development of future initiatives with a holistic approach to the role of higher education in foreign policy and development interventions. They are experimental in character, and their success is by no means self-evident: They explicitly endeavor to depart from the "silo" approach embedded in the administrative principles of public organizations. To be truly innovative, it is imperative that they actively disengage from established structures and circumvent conventional practices. Nevertheless, they must adhere to the given compliance regulations and are subject to institutionalized norms and political proclivities beyond their control. They are required to plan their activities and develop their offerings under conditions of high uncertainty, which implies a high level of agility. The entrepreneurial mindset expected of them places them squarely at the periphery of their respective organizational environments.

The project's peripheral position allowed stakeholders and participants to identify boundaries they had previously taken for granted as constructed and malleable. Once they discovered their contingent nature, they became able to move, cross and even ignore these boundaries where necessary. An important aspect is the continued feeding of this learning back into the processes of negotiating and transcending such boundaries. Regarding the activities and structures of the overall pilot project, the contestation and renegotiation of three particular boundaries have shaped its character as truly innovative and distinct from conventional academic instruction and have established organizational structures for programs of higher education. The history and scope of the project illuminate both their contingent natures and how their taken-for-granted characters shape our expectations, actions and scope of action regarding the use of technology to improve higher education.

Three kinds of taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in the organizations and institutions of higher learning create boundaries that challenge designers, developers, instructors, managers, and students of innovative learning formats, and they will be addressed in turn. The first set of assumptions concern *homogeneity*, essentially stating that an effective learning format requires an adequately homogenous group of learners. The second set of assumptions concern *subject matter expertise,* which implies a suitable balance between guided and self-directed learning for adult learners in an academic context. Third and most easily overlooked are the *institutional* assumptions that attribute unilateral, rational agency to modern organizations such as universities and other bureaucratic entities and leave little room for the entrepreneurial action on an individual level. The Institute of Islamic Studies at FUB and its corresponding academic community follow the logic of previous activities, where the construction of a new field of research posits the format of a master program as the next logical step for generating focus and possibly educating junior researchers. The university and its Department of History and Cultural Studies, on the other hand, see an opportunity for internationalization and a platform for the development of learning technologies as a boon to its reputation, its activities in this area and an opportunity to gain outside funding for possible strategic growth.

In spite of numerous efforts for institutionalization, the project has continued to develop and prosper very much on the periphery of the involved universities. Despite adhering to the standards of academic rigor, the program has gained little strategic importance at its host university FUB, in-house visibility remaining limited due to its small size and its niche research topic. While noticeable interest for the blended learning formats has developed during the IEIW Master Degree, a strategic shift in the overall university's e-learning strategy both concerning infrastructure and governance has made it difficult to transfer and apply project insights to the broader IT landscape.

Tensions inscribed in the trilateral partnership have directly impacted the operational level of program design. The given challenge to create, from scratch and without a template, effective organizational structures and practices must somehow bridge the gap between these different degrees of institutionalization and mediate between them. To effectively manage and complete its assigned tasks, during standard operations as well as in reaction to unforeseen circumstances, an innovative project's internal setup must possess at minimum the *requisite variety* of the system it is charged with regulating.

Practically speaking, the decisions and workflows of instructional designers and program administrators in Berlin, geared towards benefactors to access and participate in the program, have had to adjust continually to the realities that fragile contexts have imposed on partner organizations and program participants. These challenges defy a top-down management approach and formalized

planning, requiring instead short iterative loops of hypothesis-driven development and continuous feedback-driven improvements[12]. Agility in attitude and methods is the suitable principle guiding the venture as a collective design process and has formed a decisive quality for its accomplishments.

The overarching theme connecting the two designs contained within the IEIW program is the iterative motion of agile design and development that every educational practitioner is familiar with. Quality assurance and development in higher education especially is achieved by continually adjusting and optimizing a given set of design choices rooted in experience and theory, based on empirical outcomes and feedback through multiple instances of an instructional format. Findings related to the experimental nature of the project, which was officially launched as a pilot, concern not the static and quantifiable results of individual learning outcomes for participating students. They focus instead on the accumulated experiences relating to managing and developing a technology-enhanced course format and its administrative support structure. Front and center of these findings are the multitude of decisions, negotiations and experiments that eventually fused into the actual shape of the program. Understanding the dynamic of these design processes and the form of the associated practices will benefit future ventures of a similar kind.

6. Mapping learning paths

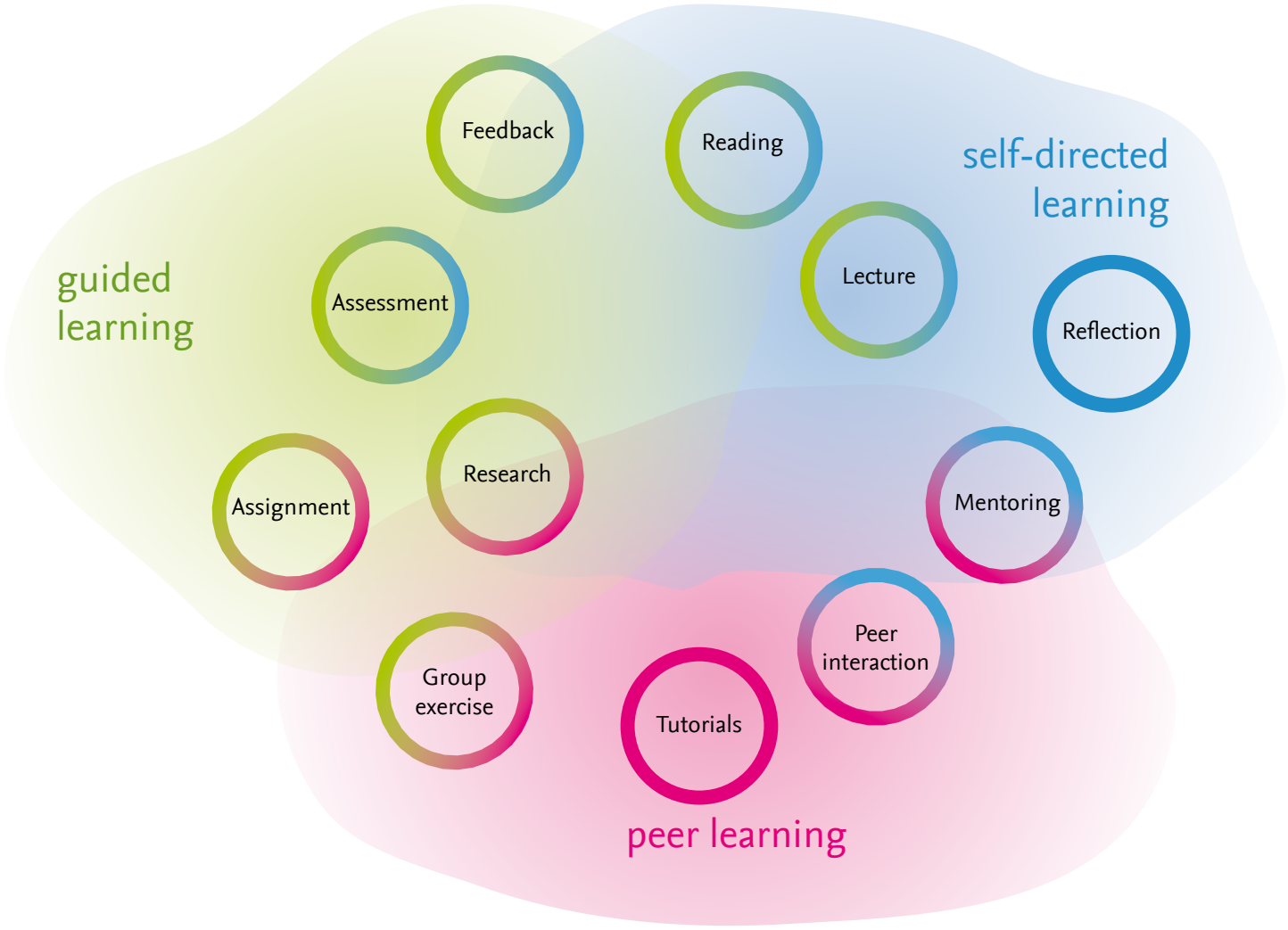

Figure 12. Course formats and assignment types corresponding to different learning goals and different modes of social interaction were mapped onto the curriculum and its blended learning mode.

Introduction: Course formats and assignments

The relationship of higher education and digital technologies in Germany is fraught with misunderstandings and skepticism. The current generation of lecturers are among the first to have had access to email and the web during their own graduate education. These digital modes of communication were in their infancy available almost exclusively within a university or research setting. Prevalent uses concentrated mainly on administration, research and course management. They fundamentally changed the way the university library functions, but did not eliminate the blackboard or the lecture hall. Applications for teaching and learning were limited to the distribution of digitized content such as syllabi, lecture slides or term papers via Learning Management Systems and communication via email.

Today, instructors are generally outmatched in digital literacy and skill by the current crop of students entering university equipped with tablets instead of laptops. Growing up as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001), they tend to reject paper in favor of always-on mobile devices for note-taking, and navigate e-books and databases for studying with

flexibility and ease. A recent wave of excitement for digital forms of instruction has given rise to the idea of disruption in higher education and a concomitant unbundling of the services provided by traditional brick-and-mortar universities (Anderson & McElroy, 2017).

Along with a potential for change, this discourse is widely perceived as threatening and unhelpful in making these technologies welcome in academic teaching and learning. Broadband access and the use of mobile devices have indeed spread globally, minimizing apparent digital divides, even in economically fragile regions. Looking beyond the level of technical infrastructure reveals that access to digital technologies does not necessarily lead to an assumption of uniform literacies and uses (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014). For university students outside technical fields such as engineering in particular, there is a clear tendency for conventional and limited use of digital technologies (Margaryan, Littlejohn, & Vojt, 2011). University instructors thus enjoy academic freedom regarding the incorporation of recent developments in their academic fields and a high degree of flexibility regarding local teaching conditions, as long as their instructional and assessment strategies comply with the study and examination regulations, which have been formalized at the departmental, school or university levels.

Digital skepticism is arguably most pronounced among educators in the humanities. It is unclear what, if anything, technology can contribute to the particular set of instructional modes prevalent in the tradition of continental *Geisteswissenschaften*. What role should digital tools play to emulate, let alone improve, the discursive method of Socratic dialogue, the careful dissection of concepts and the critique of coherent argumentation? These kinds of learning arrangements, according to academic dogma, require docents well-versed in the subject matter, ready to contemplate its known and heretofore unknown facets with a community of curious learners. Digitizing texts is helpful for easier access to source material and the literature, but digitizing the classroom into a mediated setting seems to offer a lesser learning experience, as anyone who has sat through a 90-minute recorded lecture in front of a laptop can attest.

Part of this critique can be attributed to a simple misunderstanding that results from a focus on instruction and teaching. The notion of e-learning or blended learning from this perspective is often framed as a technologically enhanced or digitally virtualized version of established teaching practices. Capturing a lecture on video and making it available for online viewing is the paradigmatic example: An established, but somewhat ephemeral format of on-site instruction (lecturing) is mediated to add permanence (the possibility of time-shifted and location-independent review). Higher flexibility for the students has a trade-off, however: The social presence of both the lecturer and fellow students, the effect of spatial and temporal contiguity. Emergent terminologies such as digital learning or technology-enhanced learning and the related discourses of technology in higher education helpfully emphasize a focus on learners and learning instead of teaching. Considering that the preeminent property of digital technologies is the loss of spatial and temporal contiguity – an effective shrinking or evaporation of space and time – this terminology centers on the learners and makes accessible a discussion of the effectiveness of learning practices.

Learning mode and feedbackchannels

In light of this determination to look beyond tools and content to change processes and parameters, the technological aspects of the IEIW instructional design might at first glance appear somewhat pedestrian when compared to the mushrooming of digital educational formats during the project's lifetime. Early considerations mentioned in the grant proposal for using avatars, virtual reality, MOOC and recent innovations soon gave way to a fairly conventional digital environment of online lectures, videoconferences, discussion forums, bulletin boards, messaging, chats and email. Of course, some of these design decisions can be attributed to constraints within the university environment in Berlin as well as the digital realities in the fragile contexts of student life-worlds.

Crucially, though, learning formats were selected for the instructional design and developed within each academic cycle based on an adequate fit with the intended learning outcomes. It proved highly productive to think about digital technologies, not as replacing or disrupting established educational practices and formats, but as complementing and extending them. This attitude permitted instructors and course designers to examine which of the familiar learning (and teaching) practices were in fact effective for the diverse community of IEIW students, the subject matter of medieval history, and the skill set associated with intercultural dialogue.

The learning elements that comprise the curriculum have had to adequately provide participants with the wherewithal to achieve multiple learning goals — academic, intercultural, professional. What is of particular relevance here is that the explicit definition of these three different dimensions of learning departs from the usual distinction between "hard" professional skills and "soft" skills (including social interaction, communication, discipline, reflection, honesty, self-consciousness). There is an explicit recognition in the original program design that these conventionally labeled "soft" skills are equally if not even

more important than the "hard" skills related to the subject matter of becoming a skilled scholar in medieval history.

The problem here is that the distinction between professional and leadership skills, on the one hand, and skills of intercultural dialogue, on the other, is analytic; in practice these abilities are closely connected, intertwined and mutually constitutive. While suitable instruction, scaffolding and encouragement may be provided within the program, the resulting learning outcomes will vary on an individual level where they will take shape depending on the student's personal background and prior education experience. While the positive development of graduate academic skill, leadership and action competencies has been shown in program graduates again and again, there is an inherent tension between the two dimensions of evaluation.

Effective training in intercultural communication is not easy to design or implement. Moreover, the outcome of such training is often assigned a comparative low value for purposes of evaluation, because its mastery is classified as having acquired a set of "soft" skills. That effective academic preparation at the level of advanced graudate studies has also been successfully provided to program alumni is beyond dispute. By itself, however, this "hard" skill learning outcome does not suffice for satisfaction of the program criteria; due to its academic specialization, it fails to translate into a direct career asset for subsequent employment in the non-academic labor market. The implications of the Islamicate world as a heuristic concept corresponds to a strong interdisciplinary perspective on the subject matter and therefore explicitly includes interpretative and communicative skills of intercultural dialogue among the learning goals. Intercultural frictions on the participant side were xpected challenges to be addressed within this system, due to the diversity inherent in program parameters. The fragile context of the Middle East exacerbated some of these discrepancies into veritable obstacles, both for individual students and organizational stakeholders.

A higher degree of diversity in the student cohort translates into additional requirements for instructional design. Rather than covering the subject matter of the curriculum in a conventional ex-cathedra format, instructors have instead to effectively address heterogeneous backgrounds, different learning strategies and educational expectations that learners bring to the classroom setting. Coupled with a higher degree of responsibility for learning outcomes, faculty have to embrace a more differentiated teaching input if the goal is to maintain overall quality. Learning goals of a given module as well as the overall program have to be "constructively aligned" (Biggs & Tang, 2011) with activities that promote efficient student learning. As an additional consideration, the resulting instructional toolkit containing suitable didactic methods and pedagogic formats needs to be fashioned with the additional constraint of working in a mediated online setting. These requirements for the instructional design of the program make clear that pedagogic substance had to take precedence over technological innovation. Program modules have largely followed a distance-learning approach (rather than a natively digital-learning approach) that relies on virtualized versions of established, familiar formats of instruction so as to focus on the complexities of unfolding learning processes, rather than on the complexities of digital didactics and tools.

Mentoring, tutoring and scaffolding

In the current environment of digitally native millennial students, it is no longer helpful to distinguish between learning *about* digital technologies and learning *with* digital technologies, as was the case during the first decade of online learning. A more fitting assumption is that students learn about these technologies *along* with the topic, not in a smooth linear progression but in distinct stages that involve different degrees of interactivity with instructors, tutors and fellow students. A large body of existing research on this topic focuses on students progressing through an individual course, not on an entire degree-granting program.

Even where multiple iterations of online learning over several years have been used, studies are confined, often for practical reasons, to learning and community-interaction processes in single-course instances based on textual artifacts. Even the widely cited five-stage model developed by Salmons for investigating the importance of "e-moderating" is constrained by this approach (Salmon, 2011). Little is systematically certain about the learning formally associated with one format over the other. Nevertheless, such processes are used every day by competent instructors and motivated students, who – for all intents and purposes – seem to achieve an overall satisfying degree of learning outcomes.

Successful completion of the IEIW program, as a case in point, implies that graduates have acquired a whole set of additional skills due to the instructional design relying on online and blended distance learning. The flexibility that comes with technology-enhanced learning has a flip-side in the discipline required from participants to maintain motivation and engagement. The protective space for social interaction that enables higher learning, which is inherent in intramural, on-site education, has to be re-created or at least approximated individually by each program participant. Mastery of this dimension of the learning goals implies not only sufficient technological knowledge, it is a solid reflection of successful learning strategies, and a high degree of self-discipline and self-organization.

Taken together, this bundle of competencies can indeed be a strong contributor to professional employment and leadership capabilities.

Lest the reader gain the impression that students receive a degree in intercultural skills, it should be carefully noted that these skills are inherent in a regular disciplinary master degree program. The additional dimension of intercultural dialogue is emphasized throughout this publication because it has been crucial for the project's success, and its important role in graduate education is often underestimated or outright overlooked. Having said all this, the disciplinary instruction in philosophy and cultural studies is state of the art, and mastery of such requires dedicated effort. Program alumni exhibit excellent scholarly skills, as evidenced not only in the quality of their final thesis but by the fact that many of them have continued their academic careers after being accepted as PhD candidates at prestigious institutions.

The annual graduation rates are an initial indicator of academic substance. For the 2013/14 cohort, the graduation rate was 85%, for 2014/15 it was 75% and for the subsequent cycles 2015/16 and 2016/17 it continued at around 95%. Meanwhile, IEIW graduates have completed two dissertations at the Universities of Cyprus and Teheran, respectively, and have been accepted in PhD programs at the Freie Universität Berlin, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv University, Leiden University, the University of Chicago, Yale University, Harvard University and Princeton University. IEIW alumni who have returned to the labor market have benefited from their degree in their careers at educational institutions, international agencies and NGOs, interreligious cultural institutions, museums, libraries and in journalism. Among their employers are the Goethe-Institut e.V. and the GIZ, the British Council, the United Nations, the Swedish Theological Institute and Euronews television.

First-hand learnings and impressions

If a picture can stand in for a thousand words, an anecdote can likewise serve to illustrate and illuminate the complexities entangled in real-life situations that defy abstraction. With this intention, the following observations shared by the project team are included here without editorial comment.

The Intervention of World Politics: In July 2014, Israel launched a military operation in the Gaza strip. The MA program was then approaching the end of the academic year of its first cohort – and as we thought, maybe also its last. The colloquium was organized and scheduled for August. We could be neither sure, if the Israeli and Palestinian students would continue to participate in the online sessions nor if the in-class session in Berlin would still be taking place. Naturally, we addressed the escalation right at the start of the first session after the beginning of the operation. The students reacted in a surprising way. They asked each other if they were ok, asked for casualties in the family, one student pointed out that in case of a bomb alarm he would need to run quickly away from the session to reach the next shelter. This kind of mutual assurance stayed for the rest of the conflict and the summer colloquium in Berlin.

On 31 May 2017, a bomb exploded near the German embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan. An immediate effect of this event was that Germany completely withdrew its diplomatic personnel due to the acute life danger – and so did nearly all diplomatic representations of states belonging to the Schengen Area. This also meant that no other embassy would take over the consular tasks of Germany, as it is usual practice among diplomatic missions. With the summer colloquium in August approaching, this meant that our Afghan participant was facing serious problems in getting hold of a visa. Either he would have to travel to Islamabad (which was not an option) or we would have to identify at least one still running consulate of a Schengen state in order to approach them for support. This was the case for the Norwegian representation. Thus, we approached them parallel to our student applying for a visa through them. Luckily, they were willing to support the participant with a visa – understanding the singular circumstances. Besides, we provided the student with a letter that he could show at immigration in case there would be questions.

Fly little drone: During the introductory week in Cordoba, one of our participants who is a hobby photographer and videographer had taken along a drone. In the evening at around 11.00 pm, I got a phone call by a furious fellow student that I should come to the hotel of the students, as police was there having confiscated the drone and questioning our participant. Though the drone had been registered in Spain ahead of the journey, there had just been a legal reform that forbid using them at all if not with a specific permit. Not having been aware of this recent change, our participant had it flying across the Mezquita and the ancient Roman bridge which caused a passerby to call the police. The officers simply had to be convinced of the actual reality of an online degree program offered by a German university bringing together students from the Middle East organizing a first meeting with each other in Cordoba due to the historical connection of the place to its topic. Naturally, the student got back his drone and there were no consequences whatsoever.

Expectation Management: Managing expectations and communicating clearly are the key ingredients for the success of an online degree program in a highly intercul-

tural context. Independent of the actual whereabouts of the participants, the heterogeneous composition and the individuality of personalities will confront any organizer with challenges. It must be clear right from the start, which rules are carved in marble and which are more flexible for discussion. There are some starting points, we learnt and tried to keep in mind throughout the program:

- It is risky to presume that people know what they have to do.
- Keeping participants permanently in the loop by a regular, transparent and pro-active flow of information is important.
- Consistent and reliable information is key, as are approachability and respect. This starts with the first contact.
- It is recommendable to encourage participants to communicate directly and immediately – if need be by using confirmation messages and/or deadlines. Assuming compliance to deadlines will most certainly be disappointed and expecting direct communication about it as well.
- Simply the fact of being approachable as an organizational team will make one the addressee for complaints, critique and (more or less justified) desires. One has to learn how to cope with it – registration to the best gym in town could be one option.
- There will be differences that cannot be solved or "healed".

[by Katja Jung]

Emotion Management: We manage the diversity of the group and the concerns that arise due to the fragile context in which our students learn by offering our students space and time to approach us with all kinds of problems or issues related to their studies. Sometimes, this invites students to discuss very personal issues with us:

After I had welcomed the students for an online session and the Professor began his lecture, one of the students contacted me through the private chat function. "Sorry," he wrote "today I am only physically present at my laptop, not mentally present in the class". He explained that his father had died two days before. He told me that his mind was full of grief and fear regarding his new responsibilities for his family at home in South Asia, which made it impossible for him to concentrate. I proposed to him to skip today's online session. He replied that he rather stayed online with us, than being all by himself in his room in Berlin. We continued to chat for about half an hour about his emotional situation. Then he closed the chat, writing that now he feels a bit better and fit to divert his mind by following the discussion that what was going on in the digital classroom. *[by Imke Rajamani]*

The olive scandal: It was our first introductory session into our Moodle learning platform. Sixteen eager faces and their laptops had been exploring the system with me. Working for the first time with Palestinian and Israeli students, I had been apprehensive: Would they work well together? I needn't have worried – it was a joy to sit at learn with them. Until that one exercise. Looking back at it today I shake my head at having been so naive. You see, I had created an example course which I worked through with them. And of all the topics I could have chosen, I made it about olives.

It was quite a nice course. Videos of growing olives. Choice activities 'What olive-colour do you prefer'. Bogus papers with Lorem-Ipsum text, supposedly researching the fine points of olive-eating. And – here is where it happened – an assignment to hand in 'a nice picture of an olive tree'. Oblivious of its symbolic meaning for Palestinian resistance, I clicked through the pictures students had handed in. Quipping; little fun remarks here and there and handing out fake marks.

And then I saw the following submission:

I could almost hear our initiator's and my colleagues' hearts stop from the couch of the other side of the room. I tried not to miss a beat. And honestly, I don't remember what I said to make the group laugh. Somehow everyone kept their cool. We moved on. The example course next year was about cookies. Looking at all the present-boxes of fresh cookies in our pantry, I think it was a good switch.

The old man and the web: Sidney Griffith is a most distinguished Catholic priest and respected researcher. Incidentally, he is one of the greatest minds in the area of knowledge in which the students of the IEIW program can obtain their degree. The program was incredibly lucky when we successfully convinced him to accept a teaching position with us.

There was an obvious challenge though, not easily addressed. This eminent scholar looks back on almost eighty years of life on this earth and decades of classroom tea-

ching. Naturally, I was a little apprehensive when we were preparing his lecture. How would he fare with our online classroom? Could someone like him successfully adapt to teaching an online course?

As life goes, my ageist prejudices where unfounded. 'I'm having a senior moment' was his favorite sentence every time he thought he was too slow. But he wasn't. He found his way around the virtual classroom just about as well as colleagues half his age. Even if he had to pinch his eyes at times to read the small user interface.

Sidney didn't do modern didactic methods. He didn't need to. In his deep and well-measured voice he told the stories of intellectual history so captivatingly, many students later evaluated his course as the most interesting and insightful experiences of the whole year.

I took three lessons away from this experience. First, a good user interface profits from a few big buttons to press. We developed a special Emotiboard plugin, pictured above, to achieve just that effect. Second, rules of good instructional design are important for online learning, but they take secondary role if the charisma and authority embodied in the teacher's personality is transmitted succesfully. Last not least, Sidney Griffith proved beyond a doubt, if such a proof were necessary, that no-one is too old to teach online and no subject is too steeped in history to elude the digital modes of learning. *[by Roman Rehor]*

7. Translating and buffering workstreams

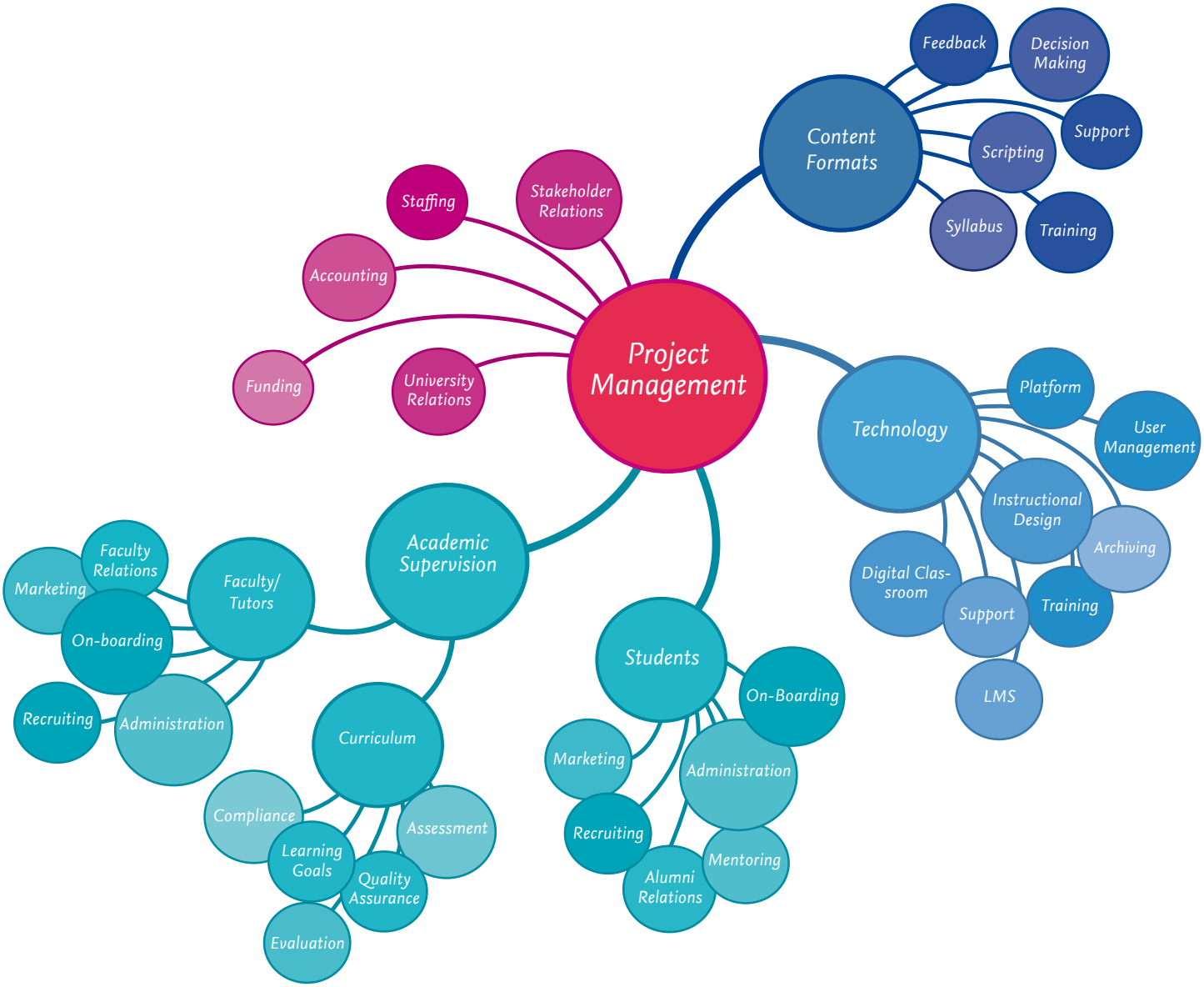

Figure 13. Dividing tasks and corresponding expertise enables efficient parallel workstreams

Introduction: Digital didactics and media production

Due to geopolitical factors well beyond what the program's founders and funders could have anticipated, let alone controlled, the prospects of inter-religious dialogue in the region look bleaker today than they did at the program's inception. Nevertheless, at the end of the funding period in 2019, the empirical impact of the program in the fragile context of the Palestinian territories may be small, but not immeasurably so. A concrete number of alumni have re-entered the labor market with a high quality academic degree, although a closer inspection reveals that recognition of ECTS credit points and the issued diploma can face local hurdles.

During the project lifetime, the political context of the Middle East has developed a dynamic that has eroded the foundations and potentials for a trilateral cooperation between the three universities involved in Israel and the Palestinian territories. It is crucial to note that successful execution of the project was possible only because it was initiated and operationalized on the departmental level and through the involvement of personal networks among

individual researchers. It stands to reason that the deterioration in the overall geopolitical climate would have preempted project continuation had it been institutionalized at the level of an official trilateral cooperation between the universities as originally intended.

These obstacles to cooperation rooted in the context external to the project itself manifested themselves first in the contractual arrangement between the universities. It quickly became clear that an openly trilateral agreement between all three universities was politically untenable for both HUJ and AQU. Instead, FUB entered into two separate bilateral agreements with each of the university partners in order to circumnavigate the tensions between the two partners in the region, effectively providing a neutral political buffer that would effectively permit cooperation in a tripartite constellation, but avoid burdening either partner with the formal requirements of a contractual relationship across the regional cultural lines of conflict.

In conflictual and fragile contexts, a preeminent skill is diplomatically clothing a project in intentionally nontransparent language to maintain a credibly neutral position and avoid the political frisson that would nip it in the bud. Note, for example, how the very title of the IEIW program is an exercise in obscuring and reaccentuating the project's intent. If it was called "Online Master to train Palestinian and Israeli graduate students in intercultural dialogue for professional advancement", it would be more true to its intent, but entirely unhelpful in terms of marketing and recruiting. Note that "intellectual encounters" is an apt description of the subject matter, the research method and the general skill-set offered by the program. Likewise, the term "Islamicate world" is a no less elegant circumnavigation of loaded terminologies in reference to both the focus of the research and the recruitment of the student cohort.

By the same token, evaluation cycles demand the continuous alignment of strategic project goals with higher education outcomes and development policies related to "fragility". But an overt embrace of such terminology can overlook a development project's changing realities that take place parallel to project runtime. Evaluators should therefore be aware of possible scope creep during evaluation processes over multiple academic cycles.

Evaluation criteria need to be adapted to the context of a particular program, but changes in the overall development or education discourse, for example, are easily super-imposed onto project outcomes after the fact. A more productive approach is to develop evaluation criteria together with the project team so as to be able to consider indicators that emerge during the project's runtime, especially when a longer time horizon is being considered.

More importantly, the project team needs to keep in mind that a number of complex assumptions and hypotheses were formed at the outset of this project. Measuring indicators and outcomes alone documents the effectiveness of these assumptions as translated into operational practices. But ex post it is easy to forget that their original validation or contextualization amounts to equally valuable output in terms of project lessons, of which this handbook aims to capture a few.

Academic quality and sustainability

The IEIW project addresses a systemic obstacle in the Middle East and fragile contexts more generally, namely the scarcity of post-graduate academics and qualified decision makers in executive positions who are able to communicate effectively across religious and political borders. In part, such shortages result from too few available formalized educational opportunities with the capacity to provide this kind of intercultural communications skill. This lack is also a result of limited access to those opportunities that do exist.

Institutions of higher education in the Middle East are certainly home to individual proponents of intercultural education opportunities. On an organizational level, however, they must invariably align with the prevalent political agenda of state policy and the religious realities of surrounding social structures. The creation of transcultural or interreligious initiatives within the region cannot count on institutional encouragement or support. Even where such programs exist, it is difficult to populate them in a continuous fashion. General access to advanced training programs is often limited for marginalized groups to begin with, or is practically ruled out by security concerns or economic hardship for potential students from these backgrounds.

A remarkable aspect of the program design was formulated during one of the interviews with representatives from AQU partner university. As a university, AQU had formally withdrawn from the stakeholder network. The political tensions had flared up to the point where a boycott of the program became the only viable political position for al-Quds University. Sari Nusseibeh resigned as its president in the summer of 2014, just as the pilot iteration neared completion, and the program he had created fell victim to a more hard-line institutional approach taken by his successor. The loss of the third pillar in the trilateral cooperation these unforeseen and the rather sudden developments posed an existential threat to the program, since the project could neither replace the institutional partner with an alternative partner nor continue without a similarly strong grounding in the Palestinian territories for the numerous internal and external reasons outlined in Section 1 above.

At this point, the loosely coupled organizational structure of universities (Weick, 1976), so often a stumbling block for strategic innovation, was actually helpful in devising

a solution to this dilemma. Though no longer president, Sari Nusseibeh resumed his post as a professor at AQU with the associated teaching activities. Helped by his standing in the research community and his reputation for personal integrity, numerous instructors, researchers and administrators at AQU maintained strong personal working relationships with the project team in Berlin on an informal, noninstitutional level in spite of the official boycott. Relying on these personal networks was necessary to provide active support in the annual recruitment and admissions process for new students as well as the ongoing mentoring support and in alumni relations.

It was clear to all of these individuals that their university, as a prominent public stakeholder in the continuing conflicts of the politico-cultural landscape, was no longer officially unable to condone a trilateral cooperation with an Israeli university in light of the increasingly hostile political climate in the region. But those that continued a personal engagement with the program were steadfast in their conviction that continuation of the project and similar initiatives could contribute to an improvement of the selfsame situation. Accepting such contradictions as inherent to the cyclical motions of cultural and political conflict, they were easily able to separate and smoothly navigate different levels of formal commitment to their organization (and the political position it represented) and their individual engagement for research and teaching with motivated students in their professional fields.

The fragility of Palestinian state and educational institutions was thus functionally helpful in that individuals enjoyed a sufficient degree of leeway for this kind of informal interaction. But as much as these partners appreciated the main thrust of the project in terms of education and training, they were baffled by repeated efforts from various project partners to achieve a higher degree of visibility of the program's academic output and a stronger push for its institutionalization. It was clear from their point of view that, once their continued clandestine activities were publicly exposed, they would have to cease (and possibly negate) them immediately. Their expectation towards the partners in Germany especially was that their informal engagement would be countered with an understanding that continued engagement would have to be handled discreetly until the political environment became more conducive to cooperation. When confronted with the desire of funding agencies to increase the visibility of project outcomes by marketing and public relations activities and to reestablish a formalized relationship albeit at departmental level with the program, an interlocutor at AQU finally responded, with some exasperation, "Formalization and visibility would spell death to this program."

From the point of view of the Palestinian partners, the quality of program design and student motivation were beyond doubt and continued to draw them into cooperation with the program. For the project to continue its educational outreach and achieve its political goals on an individual level for students and instructors, however, it was equally clear to them that, on an organizational and institutional level, the program needed to very much stay below the political radar. What is important to note is that the neutral space for approximation and co-operation created virtually by the online learning environment does not translate into the socio-politically fragile circumstances of participants' surroundings. While the digital tools can provide them with virtual access to educational opportunities, the students, teachers and administrators ignore at their peril the impact a commitment to such a program carries within their actual life-worlds.

The important distinction here is between high internal academic standards that do not translate into external mainstream acceptance. In terms of outside acceptance, academic excellence is sidelined by the political tensions affecting the Middle East region, so that for the program to achieve its political goals, it has been well advised to maintain a peripheral position.

Third space versus the chair principle

After the Bologna reforms, the European university as an institution in the 21st century knowledge society no longer enjoys the protective aura of an ivory tower that is publicly funded but restricted to social elites, who rely on its monopoly for the transmission and expansion of knowledge to acquire training and skills (Seyfarth & Spoun, 2011). Increased scrutiny into its internal administrative mechanisms has resulted in the university becoming more similar to regular organizations: Its public funding means increased accountability and transparency for its modes of governance. The competition from alternate education providers and the increased mobility of students have resulted in a competitive environment and demand clear value propositions. The overall contributions expected of the university on a personal, regional and social level have moved beyond research and education to include economic development.

Across the European university landscape, a concomitant growth of the number and role of university administrators is clearly observable relative to the number of academic instructors and researchers (Baltaru & Soysal, 2017). This trend has long been familiar in the context of the United States' higher education system, and is commonly associated with the growing orientation of higher education institutions toward increased autonomy and an expansion in the scope of their mission. This is an unsurprising development in light of the different kinds of specialized knowledge associated with the different mission of a modern university and the overall growth in student numbers. This development has

been shown to correlate across geographical and institutional differences with a university undertaking "entrepreneurial" activities in new "markets" rather than the structural pressures of budget cuts or deregulation. A growing body of literature is examining these emerging professional roles that are not part of the administration in the traditional sense, but instead involve academic staff not directly engaged with either research or teaching (Schneijderberg, Merkator, Teichler, & Kehm, 2013), as academic professionals working in the "third space" of higher education institutions (Schneidewind, 2016; Whitchurch, 2008).

Yet, in spite of these changes, organizing on-site academic instruction continues to follow a "chair principle" that turns out to be ill-equipped for the administration of distributed online and blended learning (Kerres, 2001). The professorial chair enjoys a (surprisingly) autonomous and central authority in defining, operating and assessing curricular knowledge. The chair is thus responsible for quality assurance according to disciplinary conventions, and in this role is (loosely) supervised by a community of scholarly peers.

In contemporary e-learning projects, additional processes to on-site instruction arise in areas such as IT platform administration, media production and distribution, project management and reporting. The resulting number of complex tasks requiring specialized know-how that is more or less unrelated to the academic subject matter at hand results in numerous different operational roles. But routines engendered in the history[13] of the "chair principle" tend to inhibit effective division of labor and instead encourage a "lone warrior" mentality, wherein all aspects of the project are to be executed within the respective department, often by docents themselves. Kerres (Kerres, 2001) points out that this one-stop-shop approach is markedly distinct from processes of media production pervasive in the industry, where in-depth expertise leads to a narrowly defined division of labor among the individuals involved.

In the context of a university, the resources invested by academic staff into acquiring the necessary skills can hardly expect to match IT specialists in professional quality. Yet it is rarely an option to outsource IT administration and media production entirely to external service providers, due not just to prohibitive costs and slow turnaround times, but also because learning materials need to be flexibly adaptable to different contexts and learning demands. So technical decisions can be handled in-house and do not become constraints for pedagogic practices and learning progress, a modicum of expertise and capacity within the team is helpful for technical support as well as for the administration of the IT learning platform and for the production of multimedia digital learning materials published there. Having acknowledged the broad portfolio of skills required, a clear division of labor is crucial for sustainable workflows, even more so for small project teams. Moreover, an argument can be made to keep the technical aspects (such as platform configuration, software tools, communication channels) limited to a clearly defined set of functionalities that can be maintained without the help of specialized expertise. In turn, project funds are better spent on staff development and student/faculty training on the use of easily accessible and simple digital tools, rather than on investments in sophisticated software requiring subsequent expenditures for external support services. While the former approach tends to the accumulation of useful skills in-house over time, the latter approach results in a less sustainable model of recurring fixed costs.

Different kinds of expertise are required to deal with media producers, central student administration, the international office or the departmental oversight commission. Rather than spreading this kind of expertise around, it is best to rely on a one-face-to-the-customer approach to provide continuous, reliable streams of communication with external partners. As long as sufficiently effective practices for internal team communication are in place, it is more efficient to consolidate these information streams internally and manage them consistently.

These activities and relationships are negotiated within a university department and its neighboring organizational units, but belong neither to academic teaching nor to the routines of administrative bureaucracy. In their entirety, they are usefully understood as constituting a "third space" (Pohlenz, Harris-Huemmert, & Mitterauer, 2017; Whitchurch, 2008) of overlapping, sometimes conflicting identities, roles and responsibilities. With roots in post-modern human geography (Soja, 1996) and post-colonial discourse (Bhabha, 2012), the idea of a third space acknowledges that a (long-term) cultural transformation within an organization such as a university takes the (short-term) empirically observable form of individuals having to address the concrete dissonances created by encounters and imperatives of different cultural spheres. Plainly put, the logistics of public administration (compliance, efficiency, transparency, standardization, legal frameworks) inevitably clash with the demands of intercultural online teaching (ingenuity, experience, experimentation, innovation, contextualization, design, heterogeneity), and these clashes manifest themselves on the individual level with conflictual interchanges among colleagues or contradictory loyalties within an individual's decision-making and actions.

The logics driving different workstreams must be negotiated within the third space, which makes this growing area of university activities a contested territory by definition. This implies that many of these conflicts cannot be neatly dissolved by compromise or translated by dialectic synthesis into a common approach. Just as often, the task for project management is to sufficiently buffer these potentially incompatible activities from each other for each to continue undisturbed and uninhibited on different, nonintersecting planes.

8. Negotiating innovation and compliance

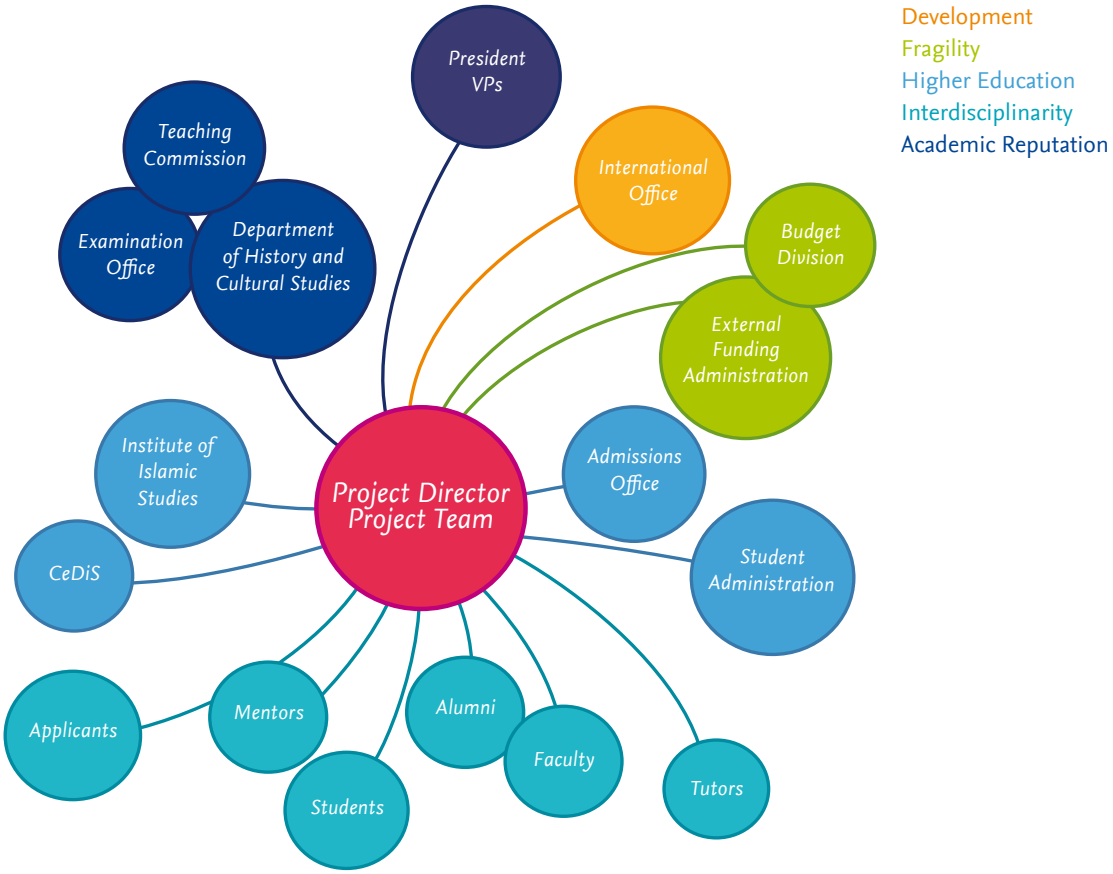

Figure 14. Multiple rationalities require translation and buffering strategies.

Introduction: Governance for wicked problems

This section on innovation and compliance presents the tensions between an initiative fueled by optimism, persistence and academic creativity and an environment that is heavily regulated and structurally resistant to change. Just like the proverbial bumblebee's ability to fly seems to defy the laws of aerodynamics, the initial founders of what later became the IEIW Master program had defiant faith in the merits of an idea. The first sketch of their vision was outlined in a short letter to a potential funder – a letter that was written, but never in fact sent.

The aim of this report has been to abstract salient aspects of the IEIW Master program in the form of general principles. They are presented not as "best practices" to be emulated, because their manifestations in this particular project are deeply intertwined with their respective contexts. They may be teased out analytically, but their concrete results can hardly be taken at face value and transferred identically to a different setting. But it is hoped that these general principles can serve as guidelines for design decisions relating to other fragile contexts requiring an agile mindset and adaptive workflows.

Publishing this handbook in the hybrid format of a printed linear document, on the one hand, and a loosely related connection of digital content on the other underscores that it is not intended as a blueprint. The activities and design decisions documented here cannot ultimately be removed from their respective contexts, since they are

bound up with the political and technological state of affairs at the time of their creation (and this writing). The intended usefulness of this handbook for funders and practitioners of similar projects in fragile contexts is that of a resource for empirically grounded guidance during the conception, implementation and evaluation of such ventures. It may serve as a general reference point for strategic initiatives and cooperations to align stakeholder expectations and criteria with the factual realities in the Middle East and similarly fragile contexts.

All stakeholders involved ignored the solid and serious reasons that this idea should not take flight. They hypothesized an entrepreneurial opportunity. Technologies were becoming available that would remove or at least reduce geographical obstacles and allow for the creation of something heretofore impossible: A study program for intercultural and inter-religious dialogue that focused on the joint enrollment of students from cultural spheres of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, explicitly including Israeli and Palestinian participants.

In a truly entrepreneurial spirit, the initiators' aims were anything but modest. From an academic perspective, the founders attempted to construct a research agenda and shape a field of academic inquiry in the humanities. From an educational perspective, the project goal was to provide world-class training in intercultural and inter-religious dialogue for a generation of professionals, a training that would amount to relevant real-world career skills. From a development perspective, funding agencies targeted opportunities for technology-enhanced education and training to marginalized groups within a conflictual, politically unstable world region. Taken together, these multiple agendas and their ambitious and partially conflicting objectives amounted to a near infinite list of reasons for the immediate grounding of the aerodynamically impossible bumblebee project.

As their outcome makes clear, many of the apparent obstacles at the beginning of the undertaking in fact turned out to be enabling conditions that gave the project its ultimate shape. Positioning itself in such an unstable, marginal space – outside of established research traditions, experimenting with emergent digital formats and addressing students in a fragile geographic region – created both the necessary room to maneuver and exempted the project's creation and scope from established expectations, making innovation possible.

This section describes the governance mechanisms of the project inside its university environment. Because the IEIW project addresses a "wicked problem" (Dentoni & Bitzer, 2015) that encompasses a multitude of incommensurable variables across various dimensions, the program has been impossible to administrate and govern according to the conventional top-down logic of project management. Instead, the unifying organizational principles behind both the instructional design and its administrative foundation are the methods and the mindset of agility.

Virtual faculty and material impact

With the introduction of the Bologna reforms in 2006, the calculation of student capacity for a university and teaching load per student has devolved from the interstate level to decision-making by state ministries. This has allowed states to depart from a system of teaching loads standardized by discipline (Curricular Norm Value, CNV) and instead consider local conditions for calculating student teaching loads and faculty capacity on a per-program basis (Winter, 2013).

The instructional quality that departments with a historic-philological focus at German universities were able to provide suffered especially from the rapid rebalancing of the variables used for calculating teaching load and faculty capacity (Herbert, 2008). A CNW value lower than in the humanities has only been applicable to law programs, where it has been deemed so low as to be unconstitutional due to a violation of equal conditions clauses (Würtenberger & Fehling, 2000). The politico-bureaucratic illusion that the size of a lecture can be increased to the practical if not the theoretical maximum without any loss of quality in teaching thus appears to have collapsed. Meanwhile, the humanities continue to be underfunded, yet their worth is growing in terms of employability. Learning outcomes in what can broadly be called the liberal arts have been shown to generate positive outcomes in intercultural effectiveness, inclinations to inquire, lifelong learning and leadership, independent of student background characteristics and institution attended (Seifert et al., 2008).

The blended learning format allowed the History and Cultural Studies Department in Berlin to circumvent these standard indicators for student-teacher ratios and assemble a virtual faculty of renowned researchers, each a distinguished expert in their fields, to teach a highly motivated group of students. Considering the vintage character of the subject matter, in which the research community is thinly spread across the globe, this is not a trivial feat. Without this virtual faculty, the department would have been hard pressed, and probably proven unable, to offer a sufficient roster of instructors steeped in the relevant field to justify similarly specialized on-site programs.

The ability to invite every year anew scholars with the most recent and most relevant research activities further assured that teaching would be steeped in state-of-the-art methodology and up-to-date inquiry. Crucial for an emergent,

interdisciplinary subject, the selection of lecturers from experts in different academic disciplines and their corresponding methods benefits not only the breadth of the educational program, but as a side effect creates another advantage: Continuous variation of perspectives and approaches on the subject matter is an opportunity to sharpen the nebulous contours of the overall research agenda and thus contributes to the development of the field itself.

Intercultural learning goals of the program are supported by a corresponding diversity regarding sociocultural backgrounds among faculty as well. Looking beyond individual learning units, such as a lecture, their professional relationships and communicative practices among each other, as well as their engagement with students, adds another performative dimension. They are, in fact, engaging in intercultural dialogue, echoing the interreligious discourses of the Islamicate world they are studying. It matters, in other words, not just what they teach, but how they teach it. Students can experience directly the possibility, the validity and the benefits of intercultural dialogue that is practiced by their teachers.

The e-learning lecture and seminar formats have enabled practically all interested instructors to participate in the program, because it has offered precisely the kind of spatial and temporal flexibility inherent in digital technology that an equivalent on-site program is unable to replicate. There is no need to apply for leave of absence at their home university, no travel arrangements have been necessary, no residency at the hosting institution in Berlin have had to be arranged. The threshold for their active participation has been lowered significantly by the online nature of the program.

The fundamental notion of higher education access, which the online learning format offered to students from fragile contexts, equally applies to the instructors as well. For them, the online format has been able to circumvent the very stability of their environment, whose rigidity under conventional circumstances would have impeded or limited their ability to participate in the project, in other words: their action space. Their use of e-learning has opened up the space and provided the necessary flexibility that has enabled their participation.

From the host university's administrative point of view, this flexibility has translated into substantial savings, both in cost and in resources for administrative overhead. Nevertheless, because these savings result from expenditures that were never incurred, they have remained invisible as savings even though they are not difficult to quantify. To measure their actual volume, in other words, the material value generated by the use of online learning, one would have to calculate the amount necessary for creating the equivalent on-site program with lecturers actually coming to Berlin.

Some efforts have been made in the recent past to calculate the cost of on-site teaching in comparison with e-learning in the form of Massive Open Online Courses. They have concentrated, however, on effectively scaling-up individual learning units, such as individual lectures for a large number of participants, to calculate per capita costs for viable business models (Epelboin, 2016). Unfortunately, no usefully applicable benchmark measure is readily available for comparing a full on-site master program with an online equivalent, arguably because the associated investments differ substantially by discipline, duration and educational environment. Since the amount of savings has beenas understood to be substantial by the external third-party funders of the IEIW program, the upside of "cost savings" has never needed calculation during the program duration. These cost savings remained invisible matters, though, because granting teaching assignments to visiting lecturers is an administrative decision at the departmental level with significant impact, independent of the funding source. All such guest lectureships have to be approved annually by the Teaching Commission for the overall Department of History and Cultural Studies, because they invariably increase the official headcount of adjunct lecturers and therefore the volume of teaching resources within the department.

Core office and Advisory board

Due to the cooperative nature of the overall project, overlapping agendas of external stakeholders have meant that educational, economic, political and academic goals have had to be balanced in the design of the IEIW program. The network of relationships and governance within the host university is not directly susceptible to many of these goals. Departments and governance bodies tend to follow their own criteria. The responsibilities, priorities and expectations of different departments and organizational units within the university have therefore demarcated a corridor of action for project parameters.

A small project team at the Freie Universität Berlin has been in charge of operations at the core office throughout, under the dual leadership of an academic director and a managing director. Aside from the operational demands of administration and development, the team has been tasked with achieving project indicators and balancing the funding agendas. Perhaps an equally important contribution to this successful outcome can be attributed, of course, to the students enrolled in the program.

In the process of knowledge transfer and instruction, the project management team was originally conceived of as merely functional, charged with program operations (recruitment, admissions, administration, compliance,

reporting), but mostly invisible when it came to subject matter and content, with the possible exception of quality assurance over time. This is in part due to the standard template for funding programs of this kind, partly due to the high degree of uncertainty regarding the final artifact when the program was first conceived.

As it turned out, due to various specifics of the program, the operational team has had to compensate for deficits created by the lack of state structures on the benefactor side due to the fragility of the context. Moreover, the project team has also had to mediate and buffer the similarly absent structures on the side of the program facilitators, due to the program's ad-hoc and pilot nature.

The project team recognized early on that the accumulation of institutionalized knowledge passed on among student and faculty peer groups in a conventional program of study, with overlap among the various student cohorts, would have to be documented, formalized and effectively disseminated to incoming students and faculty to achieve the desired learning outcomes during the implementation phase. Ultimately, the project team became aware of the rapid institutionalization of these pedagogic aspects essential to student learning, so that program alumni were recruited to provide on-boarding and mentoring support for the incoming cohort to assure that the routines of "operational blindness" would not negatively impact these aspects.

The academic Advisory Board, consisting essentially of the program founders, oversees and supervises the overall program, determines content and structure of the curriculum, interviews applicants and participates in the selection of students for admission. They are intimately familiar with the subject matter and the program's administrative workings, yet in their capacity as board members, they are not directly involved in teaching. The board instead focuses on mentoring the overall cohort, sometimes individual students, but is mostly concerned with balance and cohesion in the student community as a whole. The Board as an organizational vehicle was created as just such a make-shift solution, since it allows program funders to continue in their duties to the project even after their respective relationship to the institution in the trilateral partnership has changed in character.

On a departmental level, the transfer of its founding scholar, Prof. Sabine Schmidtke, from FUB to Princeton University in 2014 was an immense organizational challenge and a turning point in internal governance. Yet it proved to be an informal validation of the academic qualities the program had been able to establish up to that point. On an operational level, it resulted in an unexpected organizational vacuum, since project funding and governance were tied to the departmental chair that had now become vacant in her absence. Simultaneously, the driving force behind the *History of the Islamicate World* research unit was suddenly diminished, due to a concomitant shift in departmental focus. The project has thus existed for two-thirds of its duration without solid grounding either in an endowed chair at the department nor in the parallel activities of the research cluster. It has, in manner of speaking, become adjunct to itself.

Although a pragmatic solution for governance and oversight was quickly found within the FUB department, this organizational shift made the program's position still more peripheral to strategic decisions at the departmental, the organizational and even the state and federal levels. Similarly, the partner universities in Jerusalem had to modify their involvement in program operations and reconsider the organizational support they were able to provide, albeit for different reasons. Once the political climate in and around Israel turned more hostile, the AQU formally withdrew from the partnership in the course of 2014, as part of the broader political boycott movement of Arab-Palestinian organizations. Thus, the IEIW project ran for most program iterations with merely a fig leaf version of the originally envisioned tripartite cooperation agreement that was supposed to be providing its foundation. The HUJI, on the other hand, continues to actively support the IEIW program, with high estimation for the work and the person of founder Prof. Sarah Stroumsa. The HUJI partnership plays a crucial role as a conduit and distributor for co-funding made available by the Rothschild foundation for Israeli student participants. Yet in equal measure, the IEIW effectively competes with similar graduate programs offered by HUJ in terms of recruiting academic talent. To expect the HUJI partner to actively advertise and increase the visibility of the IEIW program runs counter to the local incentives of avoiding an academic brain drain.

It cannot be overemphasized that the principal structures of the tripartite cooperation were held aloft through multiple crises by personal relationships. Strongly vested personalities within the project and a solid cadre of external advocates never wavered in lending their social, political and material support. What is remarkable to observe, in this instance, is how such strong personal connections and professional partnerships between the founding individuals, the project team and representatives of the external stakeholders proved much stronger and more reliable than the formal bonds created between institutional entities. Intuitively, one would expect just the opposite development, namely for the institutions to last and for the individuals to move on — since that is in fact the function institutions provide in light of the transitory decisions an individual might take. It is an important take-away that bridging the fragility of a development context and the push for innovation in a stable institutional environment can benefit immensely from according these kinds of interpersonal connections a corresponding degree of weight in ascertaining project viability and sustainability.

Methods and mindset of agility

Conditions for hosting the IEIW program have been uniquely suitable at the FUB research unit *History of the Islamicate World*, because of a number of enabling factors related to its disciplinary focus. The core of its approach emphatically rejects imposing the unreflected terminology inherent in the application of separate modern academic disciplines such as Islamic Studies, Jewish Studies and Christian Oriental Studies onto the past. Such disciplinary divisions perpetuate misconceptions, such as historic spheres of mono-religious dominance and perennial tensions between Islam, Christianity and Judaism that popular discourse often reduces to a shorthand "clash of cultures". Instead, the subject and its method of inquiry advance a strongly interdisciplinary and intercultural approach so as to develop a terminology beyond the reductive categories of modern-day states, nationalities and religious spheres being super-imposed on historic settings. Instead, the notion of an Islamicate world outlines a specific kind of foray into historic research that examines a flow of ideas bound up within the intellectual dialogue among world religions and peoples of premodern times.

This conceptual dimension makes the idea of a graduate studies program unusually relevant for a practical contribution to the development discourse in the Middle East. It promised to unpack and look beyond the seemingly fixed categories of states, nations, peoples and religious identities, which are regularly projected onto history and utilized by all parties, mostly to entrench political conflict and civil strife. In terms of impact, a state-of-the-art academic pedigree can ensure the increased visibility of its findings, making them available for a contemporary political discourse of cooperation and peaceful neighborliness rooted in historic precedent. Educating young researchers in this field involves explicit learning goals in subject matter and research methods, as in any advanced degree, plus explicitly embraces the skills of intercultural communication. The intercultural make-up of the student body in turn serves as a practical arena for acquiring diversity competence. Program alumni obtain a premium academic education in the field of medieval studies and graduate with qualifications that can benefit professional advancement, which they could not otherwise achieve due to lack of access to similar academic programs in the region. More specifically, problems of access in the Middle East include restrictions of movement and travel for Palestinian students especially, even to those institutions of higher education locally available to them.

Core conditions for students to meet the intercultural learning goals at least at a minimum threshold is thus embedded into the program's learning design at the levels of curriculum, teaching formats and learning mode. But tight integration of these general intercultural skills into instructional formats and curricular activities must address a potential snag. Once conceptualized and integrated among the program's explicit learning goals, the real possibility automatically arises that a given student may fail to achieve them. Just as she may fail to master a particular disciplinary learning goal regarding the subject matter for lack of motivation, effort or ability, she may likewise struggle to develop a set of intercultural communication competencies. This aspect matters, because these competencies are not optional learning outcomes or useful by-products, but a required element for successful program completion. Moreover, the one-year program duration prevents a student from repeating any given module or from retaking a course in the following semester if course requirements remain unmet. Failing to develop intercultural skills implies failure to complete the program altogether.

These considerations highlight the crucial role that scaffolding, mentoring and tutoring students play throughout the program. More fundamentally, they point to the inherent conflict of objectives within the agendas of higher education and development co-operations. To maintain the academic quality that is necessary for achieving the intended development outcomes, no compromise on rigor, performance and assessment standards is permissible in order to achieve a higher student graduation rate. Any such effort would backfire to the detriment of all graduates — past, present and future — because it risks permanent damage to the program's academic and professional reputation.

The small size of each student cohort means that every single student who, once enrolled, fails to graduate, incurs not just personal loss and disappointment, but from the perspective of the significant program expenditures incurred for his admission and training, he represents an annual 5% loss of output. Even with a careful selection and admissions process, the overall learning design must therefore take into account the diversity of incoming applicants and be aware of the dependencies between the different kinds of learning goals entailed in the program. Various design decisions and instructional strategies have been developed specifically to support and enable students in the successful acquisition of disciplinary and intercultural skills facilitated by blended learning.

When the scope and magnitude of a problem cannot be openly and exactly defined, conventional project management approaches attempting to crisply define a prioritized list of goals, allocate available resources, identify weaknesses, risks, and constraints to then designate key milestones is largely unhelpful in maintaining a big picture perspective. The entire project is too unwieldy, has too many moving parts, too many unknown variables with unclear dependencies on each other so that it is best to take a step back and focus on those indicators that are crucial to gauging overall progress.

It is equivalent to a sailor fighting a rainstorm at night while struggling with a leaking boat and a broken rudder, but still keeping an eye on ground speed. Are we covering distance in the right direction? If the answer is yes, not all the parts of how we achieved this are equally important. It often suffices to focus on the critical ones that keep the vessel afloat and moving forward. Everything else can be dealt with as it comes into view as an actual problem that can and should be fixed. Meanwhile it may be best not to overthink all the different parts of the creaky machinery, as long as they appear to be doing their part.

With such an attitude, it becomes more important to develop suitable solutions based on informed hypotheses, and to rely on short feedback cycles for continuous adaptation of non-standardized workflows. In a belief that contrasts with bureaucratic dogma, more intelligence and higher degrees of freedom in such cases ought to be attributed to people, rather than processes. Such a combination of methods and mindset creates an agile approach to design and project management that helps to clarify those aspects of the problem that can indeed be addressed effectively. The discovery of suitable solutions, thus conceived, becomes an iterative process of building and testing interlocking elements. The resulting makeshift system delineates a working definition of the problem along with the proposed resolution. If it always falls short of our aesthetic desire for elegance and simplicity, so be it. What matters instead is whether it gets the job done as effectively and efficiently as could reasonably be expected under fragile circumstances.

Appendix A
IEIW project team

Dr. Katja Jung started working at Freie Universität Berlin in March 2012. As Academic Coordinator of the Research Unit "Intellectual History of the Islamicate World", she was responsible for its strategic, managerial and organizational aspects. In this capacity, she took a critical role in raising the grant to establish the "MA Intellectual Encounters of the Islamicate World". From April 2013 until June 2018, Katja Jung acted as Managing Director of the MA program. Her responsibilities spread from strategic decision-making and budget control to staff management and international relations. Since July 2018, she is the Academic Director of the MA program. Katja Jung started her academic career with a Magister in political sciences, international law and sociology at Ludwig-Maximilans-Universität München and the University of Bath (UK). In 2009, she finished her doctoral studies at the Institute of Sociology, LMU. Her thesis with the title "Volk, Staat, (Welt-) Gesellschaft. Zur Konstruktion von Kollektivität in einer globalisierten Welt" was published in 2010 by VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Dr. Imke Rajamani joined the managing team of the "MA Intellectual Encounters of the Islamicate World" as academic coordinator in August 2018. She studied Literature and Media, History and Musicology in Hamburg and completed her PhD at Freie Universität Berlin with a thesis on the history of anger in postcolonial India in 2016. Imke Rajamani has been a research fellow of the "Center for the History of Emotions" and the coordinator of the International Graduate School "Moral Economies in Modern Societies" at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development from 2011 to 2018. She is the author and editor of several publications on the history of modern India, conceptual history, and the history of emotions. Imke Rajamani is a professionally trained conflict mediator and a systemic coach. Her responsibilities at the MA Intellectual Encounters include the coordination and quality assurance of the online teaching, the organization of colloquia and conferences, as well as student counseling and emotion management.

Roman Rehor has been working at the Freie Universität since 2011. He joined the program at the start of its first semester as an IT specialist. As the project has a large online-component, he was brought on to supervise and develop Intellectual Encounters in its technological aspects. In this capacity he is responsible for ensuring 'smooth sailing' within the online learning environment. Beyond IT administration he moderates the online seminars, trains students and teaching staff in using available online tools and has an eye on the instructional design and execution of the MA program. He holds a BA of philosophy and has a background in speech science, rhetoric and media art.

Appendix B
Evaluation results

A thorough external evaluation of the IEIW program was conducted on behalf of the funding agencies in 2017, using a contribution model to assess learning outcomes, effectiveness and relevance of the program in various dimensions. This section includes a selection of the evaluation outcomes as quantitative background information for readers of the handbook. The full evaluation report can be made available to qualified parties upon request to the DAAD headquarters.

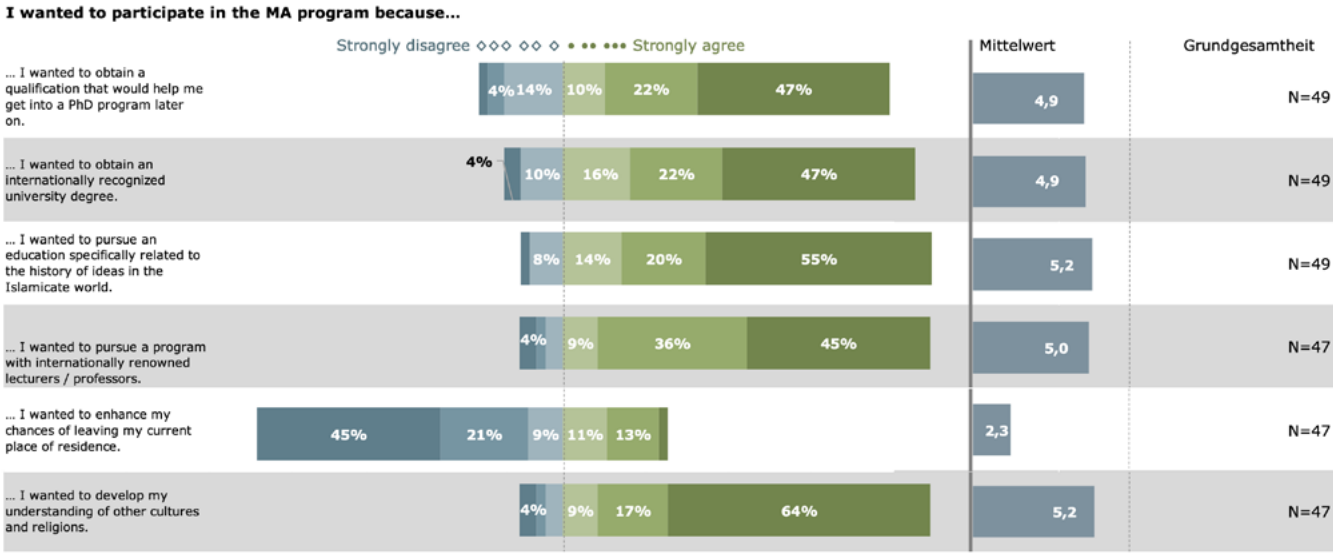

Figure 15: Assessment of Student Motivation

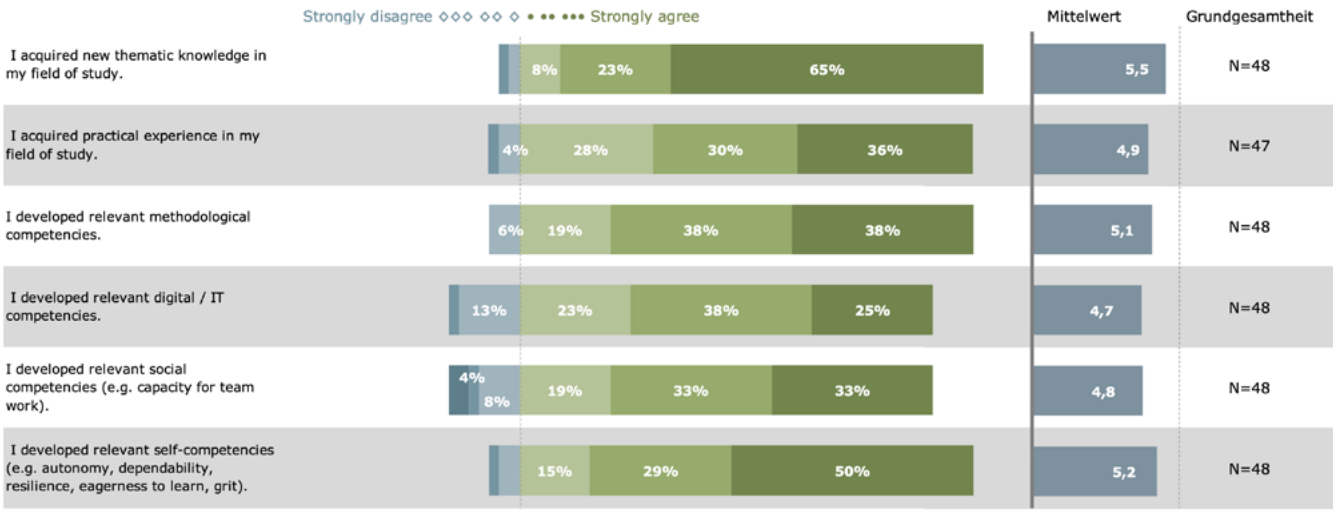

Figure 16: Assessment of Learning Outcomes

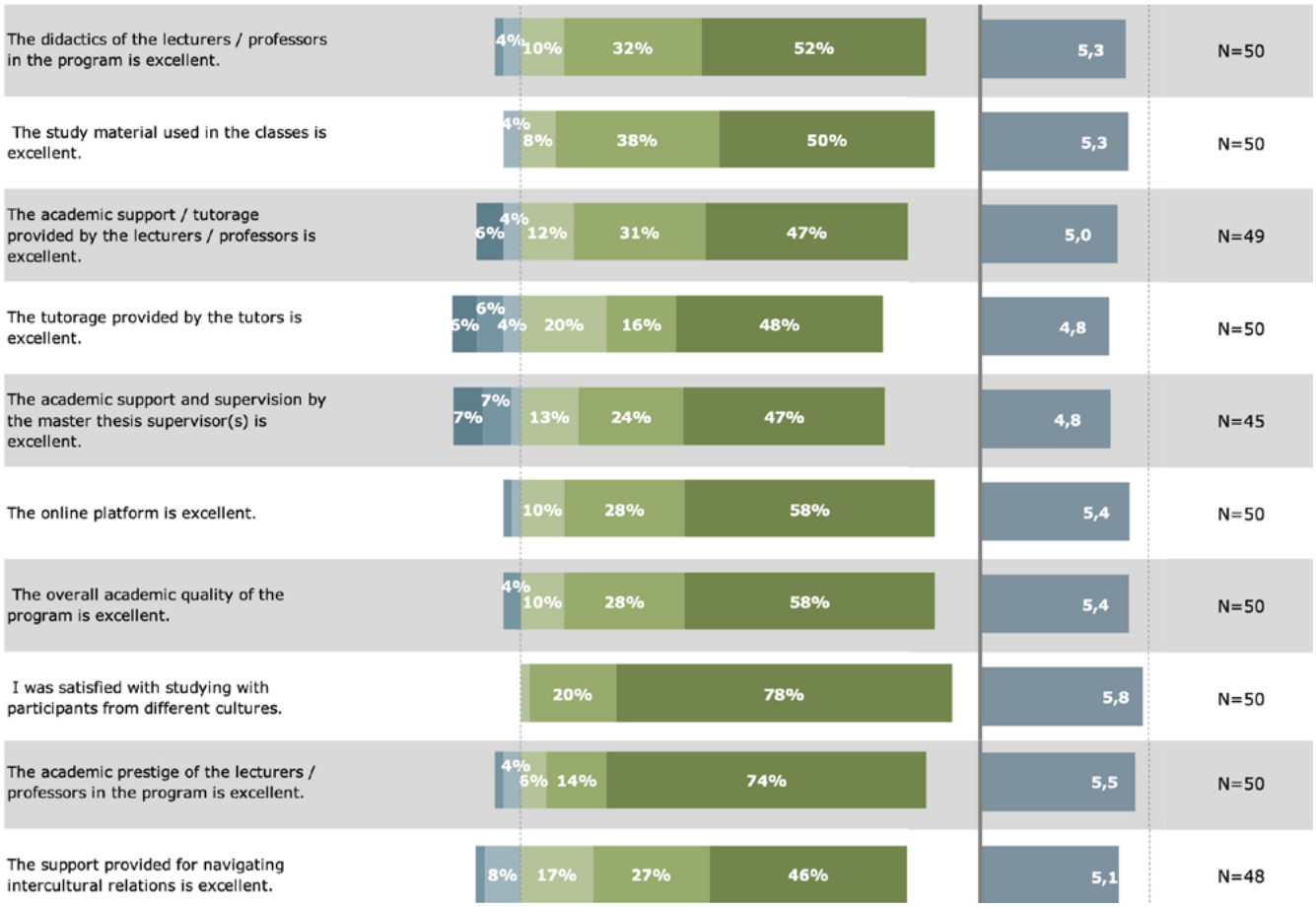

Figure 17: Assessment of Program Design

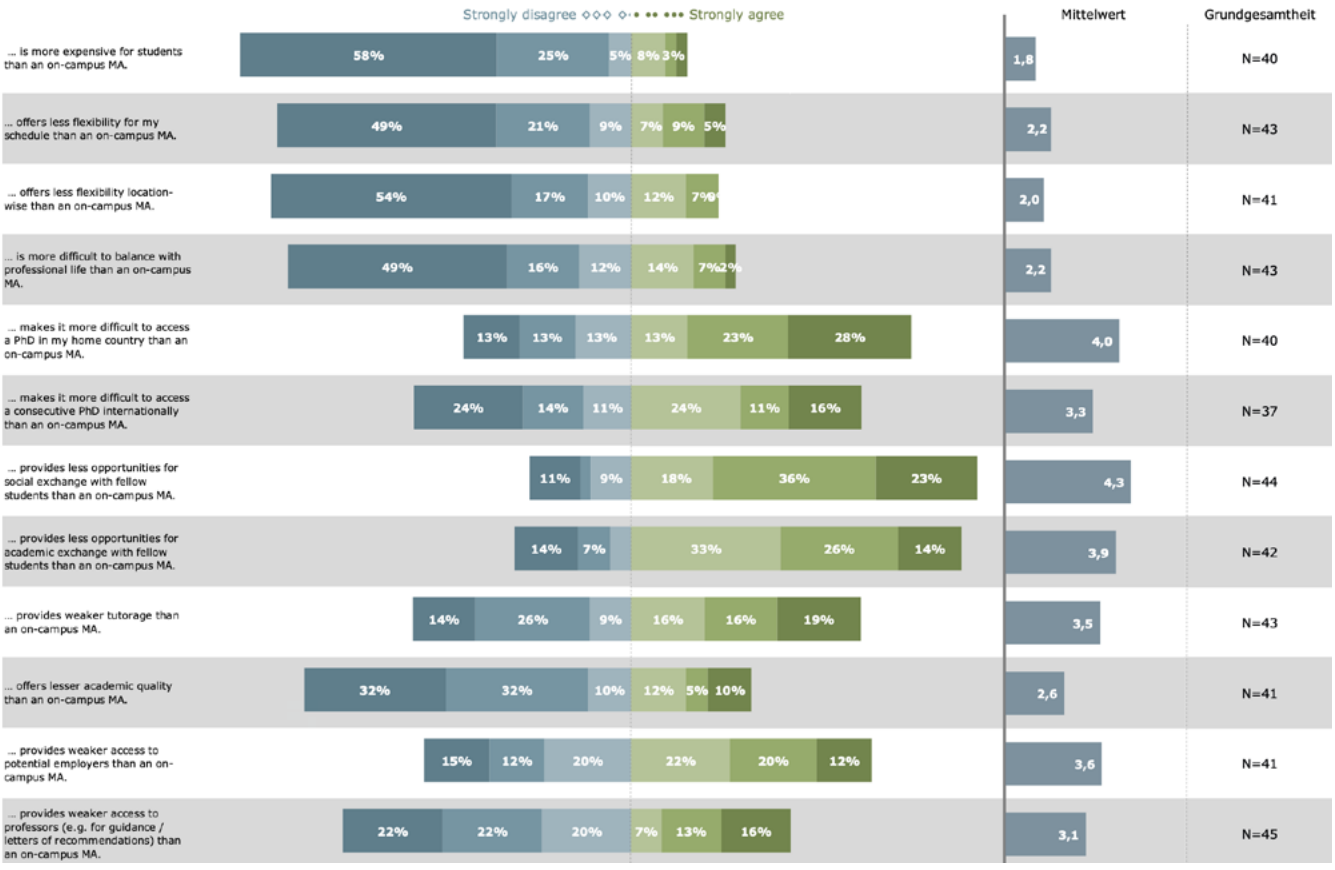

Figure 18: Assessment of Blended Learning

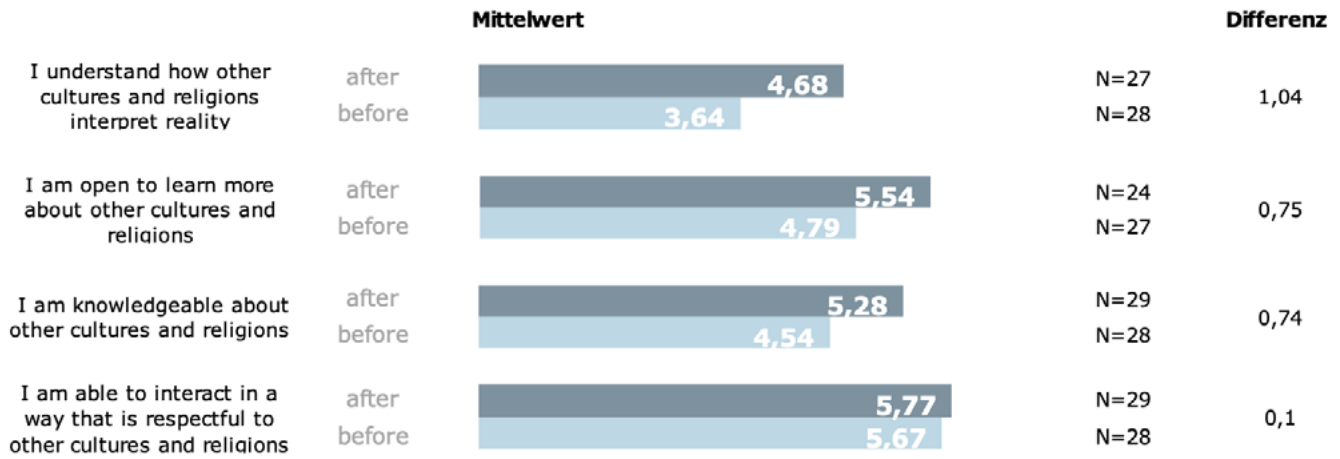

Figure 19: Assessment of Intercultural Learning

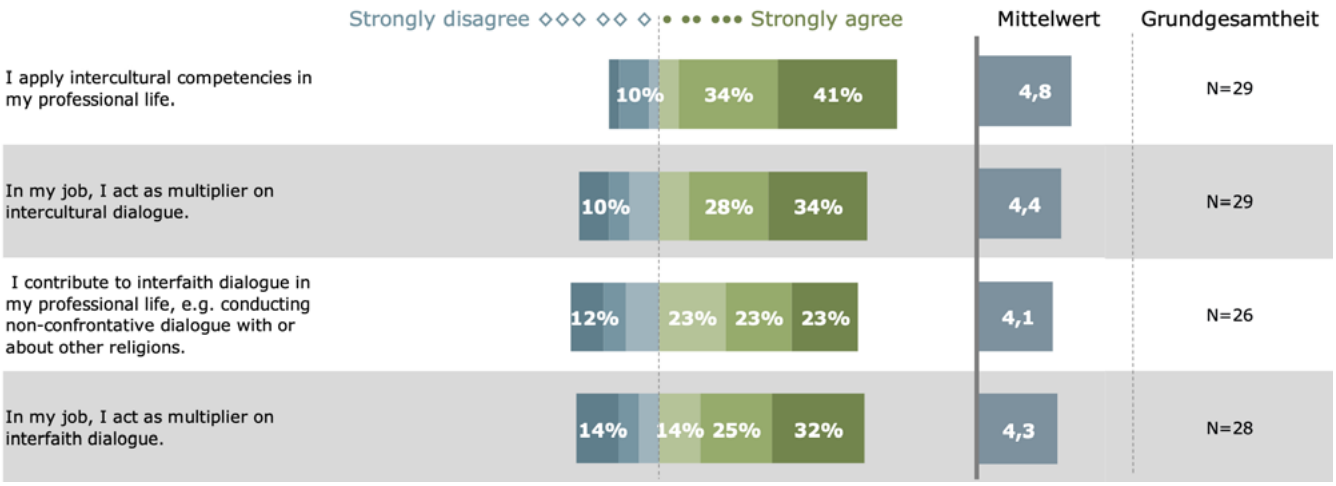

Figure 20: Assessment of Intercultural Transfer

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Endnotes

1. See https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/islamicate-society for details.
2. For a helpful dynamic map of the various expanses of the islamicate cultural sphere over eight centuries see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I14x4-q_Gj4
3. The site itself was taken offline in 2018 as outdated. Curious readers may access cached versions using the Internet Archive at https://web.archive.org/web/20100908225704/http://www.intellectualencounters.org/.
4. To their credit, academic founders and institutional funders of the IEIW Master made this connection well before the subsequent hype-cycle related to digital "disruption" of higher education in the wake of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) in 2012ff.
5. The notion of "fragile contexts" is not limited to aspects of the state and legal insecurity, but refers to a broad set of socio-economic indicators of instability that particularly affects socially marginalized groups (Binder & Weinhardt, 2014; OECD, 2015).
6. Background documentation of the Islamicate World research unit at FUB, directed by Prof. Sabine Schmidke, is available at http://www.ihiw.de/w/workspace/uploads/publications/brochure2.0_web.pdf
7. For details see https://www.west-eastern.divan.org
8. Lest anyone think this a trivial point, the reader should remember that 20th century history of digital networks takes place overwhelmingly in research settings at publicly funded universities.
9. The DAAD employed the author of this publication as a consultant for the e-learning component of the IEIW program, during the 2017 evaluation conducted by SysPons GmbH, Berlin.
10. In a German context, of course, the distinction between utilitarian skills and competencies of self-reflection are conventionally captured in the dichotomy of „Ausbildung" and „Bildung" rooted in the educational philosophy of Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early 19th century (cf. Jamme & Schröder, 2011).
11. The DAAD has published a compilation of good practice higher education marketing projects that broadly follow the AIDA model (Eggers, Klaus, Münch, & Stuckenholz, 2016).
12. The notion of agility originated as a design principle for software development (cf. http://agilemanifesto.org/principles.html), to better deal with complex uncertainties. It refers to an iterative approach with rapid, result-oriented prototyping, driven by close feedback loops with the customer. The concept has recently spread to various areas of design, innovation and management, including higher education (Gautschi & Schmid, 2018).
13. The tradition of this organizing principle dates back, of course, to the religious authority associated with the physical chair of the bishop in medieval Europe's monastery schools (W. Clark, 2008).

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