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Foreword

Aylâ Neusel

The idea of holding an International Women’s University ifu as part of the EXPO 2000 World Exposition was born in Lower Saxony in the mid-1990s. In 1992, Lower Saxony’s then Minister of Science Helga Schuchardt had set up a Women’s Research Commission that in 1994 presented its report with the programmatic title “Promoting Women’s Interests Means Academic Reform – Women’s Research Means a Critique of Science”. A spin-off, so to speak, of this commission’s was the idea of a women’s university as an EXPO project. The 2nd Lower Saxony Women’s Research Commission (1995-1997) stated: "From 15 July until 15 October, an International Women’s University is to be organised offering an interdisciplinary, international, multimedia, postgraduate study programme".

Initially conceived as a purely research-oriented university, ifu evolved into an academic project for women scientists on an international scale. The ifu concept was based on the (self-) image of science as an ongoing, evolving, forward-looking research project.

The unique concept of the International Women’s University as an academic reform project was founded on three key principles:

1. Problem Orientation of Teaching and Research
   The choice of the globally relevant controversial issues Work – Information – Body – Migration – City – Water and the idea of addressing these issues from the perspective of the natural and engineering sciences, the humanities and social sciences as well as art, consciously focusing on questions of practical relevance, gave rise to a problem-oriented, interdisciplinary approach.

2. Promotion of Women’s Interests and Gender Perspective
   As a single-sex academic institution, ifu has introduced new effective ways of promoting networking and mentoring among young women scientists on an international scale. Gender perspective is a key element of research. Research topics, theories and methods are subjected to critical scrutiny, fundamental questions are asked about the role of science and academic institutions, and efforts are made to promote innovative approaches in science, academia and practice.

3. Transnationality and Interculturality
   ifu’s consistent application of the principle of internationality – both quantitatively in terms of the number of countries represented and qualitatively in terms of the international nature of the student body and faculty – is quite unique and has initiated a productive North-South dialogue among the women scientists involved. This comprehensive international discourse, incorporating intercultural forms of teaching and learning and addressing topics of global relevance, has helped participants to broaden their horizons, sharpen their critical faculties and question cultural and scientific certainties.
Between 15 July and 15 October 2000, a total of 747 women junior scientists from 105 different countries studied at the International Women’s University. The faculty staff consisted of 313 women lecturers and visiting scholars from 49 countries. In all, then, ifù brought together some 1,000 established women scientists from every continent in the world.

The study programme was conducted in English in co-operation with the University of Hannover (WORK, BODY, MIGRATION), the University of Hamburg (INFORMATION), the University of Kassel (CITY), the University of Bremen (sub-phase of the study programme BODY), at the University of Applied Sciences in Suderburg in co-operation with the University of Hannover (WATER), and with the collaboration of the University of Clausthal (WORK).

More than 60% of the junior scientists came from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe, 20% from Germany and the remainder from the USA, Australia, Canada and West European countries. 79% of junior scientists received a grant. 97% of junior scientists successfully completed their studies and obtained certification to this effect.

A project like the International Women’s University is not the brainchild of one individual: it owes its origin and genesis to a group of critical women scientists who succeeded in winning support among policymakers and the public for its implementation. Before reaching maturity, then, the idea passed through many minds and was subject to constant modification.

The present volume is the first in a series of publications presenting the results of ifù’s pilot semester to the international scientific community. My special thanks go to Sabine Kunst, Dean of the project area Water, and her scientific collaborators Andrea Burmester and Tanja Kruse for being the first to publish the results of the pilot semester.
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