

Why

Universities and academia have tended to be insulated from the everyday life-worlds of their local contexts even as they have sought to be relevant in a globalising economy. Educational institutions must reclaim their original responsibility and role in society by participating in the wider social, cultural, and ecological milieu of which they are a part. Can we imagine universities as sites of creative confluence of knowledge drawn from multiple sources, both inside and outside the academy?

What

The work of HAB involves building multi-university clusters of collaboration and bringing into dialogue scholar-administrator-activists from the different continents. Focusing on diverse, unexpected, oftentimes transgressive strategies – including learning from the successes and failures of each university partner – HAB has emerged as a dynamic association of individuals and institutions working towards curricular change in higher education.

Learning from where we are, who we are, what we have, and how we know.

Below: Youth researchers from the Karen community of the Hin Lad Nai forest-village in northern Thailand, presenting their findings at the capacity building workshop on 'Food Sovereignty and Community Forest Management' organised by Chiang Mai University in February 2018. Photo: Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, Malee Sitthikriengkrai.

“HAB’s principal action is in a sense, that of moving institutions, because if institutions begin to change the way they think about knowledge production and dissemination, then this doesn’t become an extra thing, but the core thing that institutions do.”

Sean Decataur, President Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio USA.

Since its inception in 2016, HAB has been working with universities in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas to forge a trans-regional, trans-disciplinary educational platform, for an expanded, locally grounded, globally connected field of Humanities.

Below: Young scholars Fidelia and Mesha become part of the guild of surgeons in the city tableaux featuring Rembrandt’s painting, ‘The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp’ at the ‘Reading Leiden: An Experiential School’ organised by HAB in July 2019. Photo: Arkupal Ra Acharya.

Continuing commitments

HAB Consortium Nineteen institutions in several countries have signed agreements to sustain the network beyond the current funding. The HAB framework supports reciprocal partnership and solidarity towards a mutualisation of the pedagogical endeavours of members. In time, the HAB network will transform itself into a consortium with its own governance mechanism, including the establishment of an HAB secretariat.

Ethical Practices HAB is committed to a code of ethics collectively developed by its members. The document is a work in progress, which will change as we respond to situations and codes of conduct in the varied local contexts in which we work.

HAB Manifesto is accessible at: <https://humanitiesacrossborders.org/manifesto>

This is a jointly drafted document of intent among our university partners. It represents our public commitment to shared values and innovation in higher education. It outlines the significance of learning by local immersion within a comparative, global perspective.



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Front cover: Graffiti on Kashmiri Gate Campus of the Ambedkar University Delhi, India. This image is part of a series of photographs taken between August 2018 – October 2019. They were whitewashed by the administration soon after. It won the HAB digital storytelling prize for ‘Campus Speaks’ at the Academic Freedom Space of the International Convention for Asian Scholars (ICAS) 12 in 2021. Photo: Soumya Jayanti.



Humanities Across Borders

Humanities Across Borders (HAB) is an initiative of the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) to invigorate the Humanities with innovative pedagogies grounded in local experience in different locations around the world. Its aim is to offer models of international collaboration that place institutions of higher education in the global North and South, as well as those marginalised in the North, on an equal and collaborative footing.



Clusters of Collaboration

Decolonising Curricula



Humanities Across Borders programme (HAB) is initiated and coordinated by the International Institute for Asian Studies with support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and partner institutes. It is hosted by the International Institute for Asian Studies, a postdoctoral research centre based in the Netherlands. The contents of this leaflet are the sole responsibility of HAB programme and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Themes

HAB locates itself in real-world situations, engaging socially and intellectually with neighbourhoods and communities that constitute the physical and human ecology of both the university and its surrounding society. We work together with diverse participants to create **civic pedagogies** that enable experiences of relatedness *across borders* and encourage dialogue between different ways of thinking and knowing about the worlds in which we live.

Across this diversity and difference HAB partners identified the following four common themes or **sites of meaning-making** to facilitate dialogue and civic immersion across the network: craft, food, place, and stories.

Craft as pedagogy lies at the core of HAB. Learning by making and doing in a workshop setting gives students, teachers, and practitioners a shared purpose even as they draw on their diverse perspectives and practices to co-learn and co-produce knowledge in a congenial atmosphere. The indigo plant, dye, and textiles, for example, are common points of interest among HAB partners. One result was the establishment of a new course, “Blue Across Borders,” at the Graduate Institute of Architecture and Cultural Heritage of Taipei National University for the Arts (TNUA) in Taiwan. Seeing the role played by public universities in Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand in supporting indigo cultivation and dyeing, has inspired our West African colleagues in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Ghana. HAB meetings have also opened dialogue with other partners in Africa, including Tanzania, about the patterns of mobility among communities that sustain knowledge of indigo and its arts, as well as engaging colleagues in Asia, Europe, and the US, on broader questions about handmade products and artisans in the contemporary global context.

Food provides rich opportunities for civic action within HAB, be it such a common food staple and commodity of global commerce as rice, or portable meals cooked and sold by street vendors in West African cities. At the University of Gaston Berger in Senegal, student volunteers in the street food project, *Atelier Populaire*, conducted surveys and interviewed vendors, slow food activists, chefs, consumers, farmers, food processors and packers, both to build social and economic awareness and help reshape popular food culture and municipal policy in the town of Saint-Louis. Their work is part of the *Groupe d’Action et d’Etude Critique* (GAEC-Africa), a collective focused on decolonisation of knowledge to promote research with civic action, and organiser of the pan-African food festival. Others in the network include researchers documenting the diversity of traditional varieties of leafy greens at the French Institute (IFP) in Pondicherry, South India; students working on ‘Decolonising the Plate’ in the Dutch city of Den Haag at Leiden University College (LUC); and the Centre for Ethnic Studies and Development (CESD) at Chiang Mai University whose faculty have a long relationship of cooperation with members of the forest-based Hin Lad Nai community of rice cultivators in Chiang Rai, northern Thailand.

“When they are writing about food – be it a chewing betel or common tea-leaf salad – students are freed from the burden of getting ‘the’ history right, as one of my students in Myanmar, put it.”

Tharaphi Than, Northern Illinois University, Dekalb USA

Place (or place-making) is an extremely useful point of departure for creating civic pedagogies that render places and spaces legible for students, educators, policymakers as well as for resident associations and the communities themselves. We have collaborated with the Southeast Asia neighbourhood program of IIAS (<https://www.ukna.asia/seanet>) to explore ‘neighbourhoods as if people matter’ in different places in Asia and Africa.

These include Wua-Lai, a craft village in Chiang Mai, Thailand; Peneleh, a ‘kampung’ (urban village) next to a Dutch cemetery in Surabaya, Indonesia; a pop-up museum in Hauz Khas, a neighbourhood from Mughal times in Delhi, India; Hilla Kodji, a multi-national locality and epicentre of trade bordering Togo and Benin in West Africa; and the *banc jaaxle*, literally ‘bench of despair,’ used as a gathering place for youth in a neighbourhood street in Saint Louis, in Senegal. Using such spaces and places to understand lived experience brings people and their attachments into play with larger, more abstract determinants of identity, whether urban, rural, regional, or national.

Stories carry the weight of memory, feeling and motive, the more so when deployed in multi-lingual, inter-cultural settings. At the *Institut Des Sciences Humaines* (ISH), Bamako in Mali, HAB supports the digitisation training and building of an archive of oral records in Songhay language from private and public sources. What, for example, do vernacular terms used for cowhide patterns or indigo dyeing tell us about the histories of migration of agro-pastoral communities along the Niger Bend in West Africa? At Ambedkar University in Delhi (AUD), people’s memories of displacement and settlement in the town of Pipariya in central India reveal how a forested area became a bustling town.

Below: ‘Pan African Street Food Festival’ that brought together multiple stakeholders of food culture and practices organised by GAEC-Africa, at Saint-Louis, Senegal in December 2021. Photo: GAEC.



Sites of meaning making

Formats

Three **formats** for civic pedagogies developed at IIAS over the past decade, have proven invaluable to the HAB project: the *in situ* graduate school (ISGS), the *practice-based workshop* (PBW), and the *policy roundtable* (PRT). Aspects of these formats are often combined in practice, especially in the context of an experiential school that includes practice workshops as well as policy roundtables. At each of these meetings we have seen how learning in contexts outside the classroom opens interactions beyond the typical power dynamic focused on the teacher/student relationship. We work to support educators to utilise their immediate everyday environment as the core of the learning experience and to bring pressing local concerns into dialogue with wider issues in the present as well as in the past.

With the city of Leiden as a site for experiential learning, HAB organised an ISGS, in which participants ‘read’ the campus and its urban environs through an animated ‘town vs. gown’ debate at a policy roundtable between university officials and residents of a social housing complex. They also immersed themselves in the sights, sounds, flavours, and people at the Saturday market and a local brewery and visited a seventeenth-century weaver’s house, the local drapers’ museum, and the city’s photo archive to see the ‘before and after’ of the architectural and textile heritage of the city. Many reported how learning from walking, observing and listening to people in their daily life dramatically altered their preconceptions of a European city.

“At the Saturday market I was touched by the colourful lifestyle of the people of Leiden, like the songs of the fishmongers as they sold herring to customers ...”
Orraya Chawan, Chiang Mai University, Thailand.

Below: Meeting with women handloom weavers of the *gamcha*, a cotton upper cloth or towel, at the HAB workshop, ‘Rice: An Inter Community Dialogue’ organised by Ambedkar University at Kokrajhar, Assam in January, 2019. Photo: Aarti Kawra.



Learning in context

HAB has conducted **storytelling and writing workshops** together with its partners at Kenyon College, Ohio, and the Madras Institute for Development Studies (MIDS) in Chennai, India, to help scholars practice ‘writing’ using storytelling tools and techniques in Chennai while being immersed in the urban realities of the city, the caste question, Dravidian politics, and the like. Participants unpacked word-concepts, learnt how use simple language in their scholarship, used a personal object/artifact /photo/image as prompts to narrate stories, and practice their writing skills in the company of others.

At the four-day workshop and roundtable on “Re-imagining the civic role of the university” in Mandalay, Myanmar, of the 120 participants in attendance, 100 were women. In addition to extremely low salaries, academics in Myanmar must work with standardised curricula and the challenge of introducing change in a milieu where English is the official language of instruction but rarely the language of expression for both students and teachers. It was the first time that Mandalay University hosted an event in which a diversity of social actors could sit together with academics to discuss matters of curricula and pedagogies around common concerns relating to gender inequality, academic freedom, land-use and educational reforms in Myanmar.

At the workshop “Rice Cultures: An Inter-community Dialogue” in Kokrajhar, Assam in Northeastern India, a long drawn-out ethnic conflict among four rice farming communities of the Boro, Rabha, Rajbongshi and Santhal was set aside to provide space to discuss rice in all its aspects, including indigenous varieties, cultivation, seed preservation, tools, rice-based food and beer preparations, and cultural values.

Below: Plant pigment extraction in progress as part of the HAB workshop, ‘Indigo as Critical Pedagogy’ organised and hosted by the Taipei National University of the Arts in October 2018. Photo: TNUA.



Civic pedagogies