

Ways of Thinking and Practising in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies

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Overview

The interview stage of the project was started on the 23rd of February and concluded on the 25th of March. 9 of the 10 members of IMES staff with research and teaching responsibilities participated in interviews, as did one emeritus professor. The focus group with the students was also carried out successfully with a small group of fourth years.

The interviews were then transcribed and analysed using NVivo. The initial findings were discussed at an event open to all IMES staff; there were seven attendees including the PI. Based on this discussion and further analysis a later iteration of the findings was presented at the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies conference on the 14th of July.

Findings

The project as a whole was conceived as a development of a similar study carried out in Asian Studies by Chris Perkins and Danial Hammond in 2013. The findings of the original study highlighted the importance of language as a universal 'key' into the disciplines that make up their department's diverse research approaches. The IMES study was therefore to investigate whether the same finding was true here, and what other 'keys' there may be in the research approaches of the staff within this department.

In terms of language many - but not all - staff agreed that a working knowledge of at least one language connected to the IME world was necessary to conduct original research. For some staff this was crucial; it was not possible to call yourself a scholar without linguistic ability.

Others however objected to the centrality of language. One cited concerns that this could become an Orientalist reduction; that by gaining language skills a Westerner would have immediate insight into other cultures despite having any other form of intellectual framework. Another said that there was potentially research to be done into Muslim groups who speak European languages as first tongues, or that there was research done into travelogues written in European languages. Another academic said that the primacy of language had not necessarily led to a great deal of original research being carried out in the various IMES fields, and that there was potential for people to provide insights without linguistic ability.

Two other 'keys' also emerged from the discussion. The first was that of a tension between methodology used by the academic within the IMES field and the understanding of that same methodology by practitioners from outwith that field. The tension arises from the fact that the theoretical underpinnings of the various methodologies used by academics are derived from case studies of Western societies. This means that when applied to non-Western societies the theories either don't work or only apply with serious modification.

The result is that the academics within the IMES department feel excluded from the more advanced theoretical discussions that take place within departments of history or sociology because there is a clash in their epistemological grammar. There is a feeling within IMES that the disciplinary areas with a focus on Western societies have too much confidence in theories that are not universally applicable. In addition to this, the Western-focused disciplines are also much larger and the result is a conversational loop whereby practitioners within the Western-focused disciplines build layer-upon-layer of these fundamental theories. Because IMES practitioners consider deeply problematic

they are excluded from these advanced theoretical discussions, and also feel they are looked down on by practitioners of Western-focused disciplines for their theoretical naivety.

The second key is multi-disciplinarity. All the academics identified with one primary methodological approach (e.g. history, political science, cultural studies) yet were very happy to draw on other methodologies as they saw fit, and they would do this in both their research and teaching. This is related to the problems noted above; as a non-Western discipline with a small number of practitioners, they frequently have to resort to mixed-methodologies to answer their research questions.

Implications

If it is agreed that the three themes of language, disciplinary tension and interdisciplinarity are what defines IMES and Asian Studies in the Western university system, then these principles can be used within the UoE and other universities as a framework by which courses and degree programmes can be designed, as well as a framework by which the effectiveness of teaching can be measured. A graduating student who can apply their language skills to a novel problem, and who can use multiple methodologies while understanding their shortcomings, can be said to be well on their way to being a practitioner within the discipline.

In order to aid this it has been proposed that the findings of this research will be combined with the findings of the earlier Asian Studies project in order to write and publish a combined paper. In addition to this, we are also planning to hold a workshop at UoE around the themes raised by the combined research and to invite IMES and AS academics from other universities to participate in the discussion.

Conclusion

The project was a success in the sense that it allowed the PI to articulate a concise and evidence-based definition of what it means to be a practitioner in IMES. This means that we can develop an idea of what we are looking for in our students despite the fact that their home department is not one defined by a single discipline.