

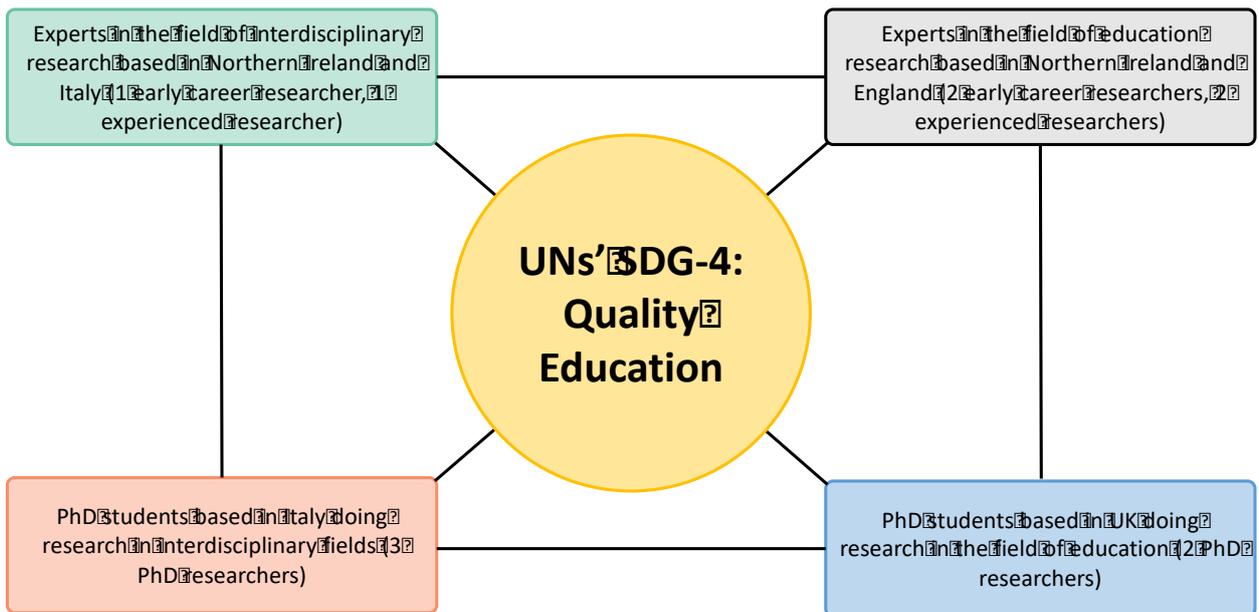
# COMPARATIVE AND INTERDISCIPLINARY EDUCATION RESEARCH NETWORK (CIERN)

Start date: 1 September 2021

Duration: 1 year

Higher education institutions bring together a range of postgraduate research students from all over the world for the duration of their periods of study. They provide tailored support and access to staff and keynote speakers to complement the programme of study in the institution. They may also provide access to facilitated researcher development courses, with or without additional certification. Unless their doctoral studies are funded with the expectation that they join part of a project team, as is often the case in science-related fields, the doctoral training experience may be an isolated one, and one that is dedicated to the niche area of study that makes up the researcher's thesis. PhD researchers in the field of education often face this isolated situation, where they usually end-up completing their degree without any exposure to anything outside their niche and hence encounter difficulties when they have to deal with people from diverse educational backgrounds in their future career. PhD researchers in the field of science even though usually work in a bigger team, but they too hardly get exposed to outside their scientific world. Therefore, this cannot be stressed enough that future success in funded research requires collaboration and the ability to operate in an interdisciplinary way. According to Irani (2018), "the university of the future will be interdisciplinary". Similarly, early career researchers, who may also have experienced a similar doctoral journey, may not have had much exposure to collaborative projects or to doctoral supervision. Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS), University of Bologna, currently asks its PhD residential fellows, to conceive and work together on an international comparative project aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as a part of their fellowship and commitment to IAS. Essentially, these recipients of the IAS fellowship grant, are international doctoral researchers coming from different parts of the world, doing PhD in different faculties and departments of the University of Bologna. This practice is relatively new and initially was introduced as an experiment known as "IAS SDG project" – a joint research activity which unites the team of IAS PhD fellows. The first project was conducted in 2019, wherein the main focus was on UN SDG-4 (quality education). Education sector was analysed to understand the impact of social, economic and substantial political changes in the four African countries – Ghana, Ethiopia, Tunisia and South Africa. The selected countries were those from which majority of the IAS PhD fellows originally came from, thereby providing an easier access to data for gathering and interpretation. As a result, to this

exercise, a project report was produced which collated the four case studies on four different African countries and it also provided a comparative analysis on the above-mentioned topic. This was followed by a presentation which took place on 11 December 2019 as a part of the “PhD@IAS Day” event. A unanimous positive feedback from the audience, including vice rectors, became an additional driver to continue IAS SDG project next year. In 2020, IAS PhD fellows decided to keep the main direction of the IAS SDG project towards education and provide an international comparative perspective in light of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The project aimed to examine how different countries’ education systems were responding to the challenge of Covid-19 through adapting their traditional approaches for teaching and learning to the new complex reality occurred due to pandemic. An international comparative education study, revealing the transformation of education sector, in the following seven countries, spread around in four continents, was performed: Japan, Sweden, the USA, Egypt, Croatia, South Africa and Germany. Similar to the previous IAS SDG project experience, selected countries were mainly the home countries of the IAS PhD fellows that allowed them to demonstrate more in-depth understanding of the national education system and mitigate any language barrier as well. The outcome of this work was again a very detailed report which collated seven case studies on seven different countries and provided a comparative reflection. This was followed by a presentation at the launch of “International PhD College” on 24 March 2021 at University of Bologna. Recording of this event and the presentation is available at the official YouTube channel of IAS. While the joint research efforts of IAS PhD fellows on one of the most important goals of UN viz. SDG-4 (quality education) have been widely appreciated, need of a structured mentoring process by the experts in the education research field was noted, as these ISA PhD fellows come from a variety of interdisciplinary background. Also, an opportunity of encouraging them to convert their IAS SDG reports to a quality publication in an international peer reviewed journal such as Compare was also identified. To address the above described issues of PhD researchers and early career researchers from both education and interdisciplinary fields, we are proposing to build CIERN – Comparative and Interdisciplinary Education Research Network (Figure 1), which aims to bring together PhD researchers from Northern Ireland, England and Italy to work towards a common goal, i.e. SDG-4 (quality education). They will be joined by early-career researchers and experienced researchers in the education and interdisciplinary fields from Northern Ireland, England and Italy, who will mentor them. While at a pilot stage this network involves only two countries viz. the UK and Italy, the team is committed to expand it further to other countries in due course.



**Figure 1** Comparative and Interdisciplinary Education Research Network (CIERN). Current total number of participants = 11; PhD researchers = 5, early career researchers = 3, experienced researchers = 3. Current total number of participating institutions = 5, spread across Northern Ireland, England and Italy. UNs' SDG-4 = United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal-4.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This project aims to address the above described gaps and build a research capacity around CIERN in two ways:

1. To provide a sustainable vehicle for first stage researchers undertaking doctoral qualifications (participants number: 2A, 2B, 2C, 2D and 2E) to come together in order to develop collaborative project management skills and work as a research team on an international, comparative and interdisciplinary education research project. They will experience the full process similar to a small funded project that they will see through the research cycle over the period of one academic year, resulting in credible dissemination outputs.
2. To provide a sustainable vehicle for early career researchers (participants number: 1A, 1B and 1C) and more established researchers (participants number: 1D, 1E and 1F) to support a small project, thereby mentoring first stage researchers as well as building their own skills of engagement and influence.

## PROJECT PLAN

Using the Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS) Bologna PhD residential scholarship programme as a test-bed, the proposed networking project offers the opportunity to enhance the involvement of education researchers with interdisciplinary researchers from the UK and Italy. The CIERN plans to achieve multiple purposes: 1) a clearly-defined international comparative interdisciplinary education project scope and timeline, 2) applied researcher training, 3) an interdisciplinary mentor strand, 4) education experts mentor strand, 5) education and interdisciplinary researchers collaboration strand, and 6) high-calibre dissemination through Compare and BACIE conference that links the project outcomes to an international audience and gains recognition. A series of monthly online workshops throughout the 1-year duration of the project will be conducted on MS Teams platform to bring all the team members and strands together and work towards the project aims. One on-site “kick-off” meeting is planned at the start of the project in September/October 2021. Depending on how the Covid19 pandemic situation and associated travel restrictions unfold, as an alternative to the kick-off meeting, an on-site “finishoff” meeting is planned at the end of the project in July/August 2022 for finalizing the outputs and dissemination activities. Given the limitation of the overall budget, only one of the two proposed on-site meetings will be organized. This on-site meeting will take place at the Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS), University of Bologna, wherein the accommodation cost of all the participants (PhD researchers and academics) from Northern Ireland and England will be covered by IAS through match-funding. Please see “In-kind and in-cash contribution letter” from the Director of the IAS attached with this application. The benefits of above activities planned under CIERN to the doctoral students are that they will have had a valuable experience more like that of a small funded project, and one that can be promoted on their CVs and aligned to formal researcher development frameworks. They will have outputs that they can share on research profiles. It is a unique opportunity to build networks, develop transferable skills and broaden their future research horizons. The benefit to the early-career researchers is that they can hone their skills of managing small projects and working in interdisciplinary teams, providing evidence of professional esteem and external engagement that will also support their future development towards more senior posts. It will provide a unique and empowering experience of working as an international partnership to enhance interdisciplinary education research outside of a formal learning and teaching (L&T) environment.

The benefit to the BAICE comes from a replicable, scalable model that can be promoted as a case

study of research capacity and network building; one that is rooted in the aspiration to bring together a range of interdisciplinary researchers and introduce them to the fundamentals of international and comparative education research. The annual SDG-4 (quality education) focused projects would seek dissemination through BAICE, such as through its Compare journal and BAICE conferences. Although the project is designed to be sustainable over time, it very much aspires to build legacy and impact, by providing materials and outputs that can be used to continue development, and replicable so that others can use the project framework elsewhere to build similar networks. This project is also designed to be a research project about the process. It is also, in effect, research about research, increasing the intellectual outputs achievable from the project.

### **References:**

Irani, Z. (2018, January 24). The university of the future will be interdisciplinary. The Guardian.

Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2018/jan/24/the-university-of-the-future-will-be-interdisciplinary>

The proposed networking project aligns with the BAICE's aim to encourage the growth and development of international and comparative studies in education. Two such studies have already been conducted by IAS Bologna PhD researchers as described earlier, which are looking forward for further dissemination through an international peer-reviewed journal such as Compare and international conferences such as biennial BAICE conference, UKFIET conference and BAICE annual student conference. This network aspires to bring together the PhD researchers, early career researchers and experienced researchers in the field of education and in other interdisciplinary fields, to foster an environment for building research capacity focused towards United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal-4 (Quality Education).

### **OUTPUTS AND DISSEMINATION**

1. A project website (WordPress or Google Site) and associated social media channels (Twitter and LinkedIn)
2. A case study of the international comparative education project undertaken
  - a. An international webinar for dissemination of the international comparative education project undertaken

- b. A published project report and associated materials of the international comparative education project undertaken
- 3. A case study of the capacity-building programme
  - a. An international webinar for dissemination about the capacity-building programme
  - b. A published project report and associated materials about the capacity-building programme
- 4. Infographics pack
  - a. Describing international comparative education project so that others can replicate
  - b. Describing capacity-building programme so that others can replicate
- 5. All of the above to be linked/published on the BAICE website, IAS Website and UU Website
- 6. A journal article in BAICE Compare journal
- 7. A presentation at a BAICE conference

#### **FUTURE ASPIRATIONS**

We aspire to develop the Comparative and Interdisciplinary Education Research Network (CIERN) further. To realize this aspiration and as a follow-up to BAICE grant application, we are planning to apply for the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)'s Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) research networking scheme with a maximum budget of £30,000. For more details, please see: <https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/ahrc-research-networking-scheme/>

The above mentioned UKRI networking scheme will enable us to expand the CIERN network to other education researchers in the UK and abroad and also to other interdisciplinary researchers based in other Institutes of Advanced Studies (IAS) around the world through IAS network (NetIAS) of which IAS Bologna is a member.

#### **SUPPORT FOR EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS**

This whole networking is “of” the PhD researchers, “by” the PhD researchers, and “for” the PhD researchers. The role of the academics involved is more of a facilitator and a mentor. Three of the six academic staff in the team have been in their first academic post for less than 5 years, and thus are considered as early-career researchers. The network will equally help them in learning about mentoring role. Three senior researchers in the team, one from interdisciplinary research field and

two from education research field bring in their vast experience to guide and support the early-career researchers and PhD researchers in the network.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

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