

Implementation of
the recommendations
from the previous
evaluation of the
**Research Institute for
Sustainability (RIFS;
formerly Institute
for Advanced
Sustainability Studies
e. V., IASS),
Potsdam**

Disclaimer

This is a replication of the statement of the German Science and Humanities Council (WR), translated into English by RIFS.

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IMPRESSUM

Umsetzung der Empfehlungen aus der zurückliegenden Evaluation
des Forschungsinstituts für Nachhaltigkeit (Research Institute for Sustainability, RIFS;
ehemals Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies e. V., IASS), Potsdam

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Preliminary note

In the statement adopted in April 2021 on the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies e. V. (IASS, now the Research Institute for Sustainability, RIFS), the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the state of Brandenburg were asked to report to the Science Council on the implementation of its recommendations after a period of three years. This request was fulfilled.

On 25 November 2024, the Evaluation Committee of the German Science and Humanities Council (hereafter, the Science Council) prepared a statement based on this implementation report.

The Science Council adopted this statement in Berlin on 31 January 2025.

A. Summary of the recommendations of the German Science and Humanities Council

In its statement of 23 April 2021, the Science Council acknowledged the societal relevance of the research focus of the former Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies e. V. (IASS), Potsdam. The Institute's work explores how the transformation of society toward sustainability, which is essential for achieving climate protection and sustainable development, can be shaped through democratic processes and with the active involvement of affected stakeholders. The Council acknowledged that the concept developed by the IASS, which integrates sustainability research, transformation research, and transformative research with transdisciplinary, co-creative policy and societal consultancy, is highly compelling.

The Council noted the growing demand, particularly in the political sphere, for the IASS's research and advisory activities as well as its scientific support for specific transformation processes. It commended the IASS on successfully establishing itself at the intersection of sustainability research and transformation research, the natural and social sciences as well as science and politics, business, and society. Additionally, the Science Council acknowledged that the IASS was well-positioned to initiate developments in science and to become an attractive partner for scientific cooperation.

The extensive organisational reforms implemented at the IASS following the previous evaluation played a pivotal role in shaping its development. As a part of these reforms, the Institute scaled back its Fellow Programme to strengthen its in-house scientific expertise, thereby improving its capacity to pursue longer-term research goals. Parallel to this, it placed greater emphasis on policy and societal consultancy, as well as the science-based design and monitoring of concrete transformation processes, making these activities central to its research portfolio. In doing so, the IASS transformed itself from a traditional Institute for Advanced Study into an institution that integrates the roles of a research institute and an advisory body, with a Fellow Programme designed to complement both functions.

To sustain and build on this success, the Science Council underscored the need for the Institute to maintain a productive balance between these functions while making more effective use of its existing potential. The Science Council out forward a number of recommendations to this end.

A.I RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE FUNDING BODIES

The Council's primary recommendation was that the funding bodies establish the IASS as a permanent institute, while ensuring its independence in selecting research topics and transfer activities. The Institute was to retain its multifunctional character, rather than shifting its focus to one or the other side. To achieve this, the Council urged the funding bodies and the Institute's General Assembly to explore institutional options as openly and comprehensively as possible, while also securing adequate funding throughout the transition period. It was further recommended that the Institute should adopt a new name to reflect its evolving function and profile.

A.II RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Focus of Work

The Council recommended that the IASS align its research and work programme as well as its core and externally funded research projects and advisory activities with its overarching mission in order to foster greater coherence across its activities. To improve its performance in research practice and deliver high-quality output for policymakers and civil society, the IASS was advised to refine its thematic focus and prioritise key areas. To achieve greater coherency across its activities, the IASS was encouraged to focus its consultancy and process design projects on areas that align with its core expertise and strategic priorities. The Council emphasised the importance of remaining responsive to emerging developments in sustainability and transformation research and policy and encouraged the Institute to continue to identify and engage with societally relevant issues within the scope of its thematic priorities.

The Council recommended that the Institute review the configuration of its research areas and forums in order to improve thematic and methodological consistency across its activities. These changes were intended to foster deeper integration between sustainability, transformation, and transformative research, while also bridging natural and social science approaches, in line with the Institute's overarching approach. In addition to this, the role of the Institute's forums was to be more clearly defined.

The report recommended that the Institute better harness the potential of its diverse research and transfer projects. To achieve this, it should strengthen exchange within and across the research areas, fostering mutual learning and reflection on the results of research projects – many of which have a local focus – in order to develop more generalisable findings. Additionally, the Council recommended that the Institute clarify how its research findings could be translated into policy and societal advice, and how transformative impacts could and should be achieved. The IASS should aim to contribute to theory-building and to develop collaborative methods and formats to advance transformations in various contexts. The Institute was also encouraged to continue refining its toolset for advancing transformative goals and to regularly review their effectiveness.

The Science Council commented positively on the overall increase in scientific publications, including in peer-reviewed journals, and the substantial growth in third-party funding. However, the Council found that, even considering the Institute's focus on applied research and consultancy, the share of funds secured through the competitive funding streams of the European Union (EU) and the German Research Foundation (DFG) was too low. In view of this, the Council backed the third-party funding strategy implemented by the IASS in 2018, which aimed to increase these shares.

The Science Council commended both the dedication of IASS scientific staff involved in teaching at universities and the establishment of junior research groups to support the development of early-career scientists. The diverse disciplinary backgrounds of doctoral students at the IASS pose significant challenges for the development of a graduate programme in collaboration with a single university. In view of this, the Council recommended that the IASS urgently establish an internal programme in cooperation with universities in the region and further afield. The Council further recommended that the IASS revise its doctoral supervision agreements to more clearly define the responsibilities of supervisors. Specifically, the Council recommended that doctoral agreements stipulate that doctoral candidates must be supervised by at least one senior IASS researcher and one university-based supervisor from their discipline. This would ensure that doctoral researchers working on transdisciplinary or transformative IASS projects remain engaged with developments in their core discipline. In addition, the Council called on the IASS to create a dedicated position to support its numerous doctoral researchers and coordinate the doctoral programme.

The Science Council gave a positive assessment of the extensive reform of the Fellow Programme undertaken since the last evaluation. This included a significant reduction in the number of appointments, the introduction of public calls for applications, and the adoption of transparent selection criteria. The Council further recommended that the Institute review the open application process for Senior Fellow positions after two to three years and consider whether some of these positions should be awarded by invitation, as was previously the case, to ensure the IASS continues to attract high-profile scientists. It emphasised that the same criteria should apply to fellowships awarded both through open calls and by invitation. Additionally, the Science Council advised the Institute to strengthen the involvement of fellows in research and transfer activities and to continue appointing candidates from diverse professional backgrounds, levels of experience, and countries of origin. It also urged the Institute to recruit more researchers from previously underrepresented countries and from the business community and industry.

Cooperation

In its recommendations, the Science Council noted that the Institute requires a broad range of disciplinary expertise to address its diverse research topics. It underscored the importance of strategic cooperation and welcomed recent joint appointments and other measures intended to extend the Institute's reach. The Council further recommended that, if institutional funding is allocated to the IASS, fixed-term appointments should be put on a permanent basis or, in the case of junior professorships, placed on a tenure track. It also advised the IASS to develop a cooperation strategy and establish a process to identify scientists in Germany and abroad who would be strong candidates for long-term collaboration. The Fellow Programme should play an integral role in this strategy. Its contribution to the Institute's national and international networking efforts could be further strengthened by the planned alumni programme.

Quality assurance

The Advisory Board should continue to audit the IASS at regular intervals to safeguard the quality of its work and advise the Institute, particularly on the focus of its research and work programme.

The Science Council welcomed the Institute's collaboration with its Advisory Board in developing indicators to measure and evaluate its transfer services, along with a tailored approach to assessing the effectiveness of its advisory activities and the processes it designs and supports. It recommended that these tools should be further refined, including the integration of qualitative evaluation criteria and

surveys of partners. Additionally, the Council advised the IASS to publish its findings once it has gained sufficient experience with these quality assurance instruments..

Organization and equipment

The Science Council recommended that the IASS proceed with its plan to reduce its Board of Directors to three members: two scientific directors and one administrative director. It emphasised the importance of equal representation of the natural and social sciences on the board. The Science Council also endorsed the plan to establish a second management tier with clearly defined responsibilities below the Board of Directors. It advised that this tier should have a degree of autonomy in the management of the research areas (now themes), be included in the Board of Directors' decision-making on key issues and, where possible, be appointed in cooperation with universities. In addition to this, the Science Council urged the IASS to prioritise gender parity when filling management positions.

The Science Council also urged the IASS to clarify how the German coordination office of the Franco-German Forum for the Future could be better integrated into its organisational structure.

Additionally, while recognising that the IASS is adequately funded and well-staffed with scientific personnel, the Council recommended that the Institute assess whether internal reallocations could allow for the creation of additional positions in the areas of administration and IT services.

The Science Council commended the dedication of staff members across all areas and qualification levels, despite their employment being limited to fixed-term contracts. It advised the Institute to offer scientific staff opportunities for further training across the full spectrum of relevant methodologies or, where possible, to provide staff with access to appropriate courses and training at universities and non-university research institutions by agreement.

B. Summary of the implementation report

B.I ON THE RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE FUNDING BODIES

In an implementation report submitted on 9 October 2024, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the Ministry of Science, Research and Culture of the State of Brandenburg (MWFK) state that the IASS was legally and administratively integrated into the Helmholtz Centre Potsdam – GFZ German Research Centre for Geosciences (GFZ) on 1 January 2023 and now operates as a legally dependent institution of the GFZ under its new name: Research Institute for Sustainability - Helmholtz Centre Potsdam (RIFS). This development followed the Science Council's recommendation that an institutional perspective should be secured for the IASS. In response, the Audit Committee of the German Bundestag called for the IASS to be incorporated into the Hermann von Helmholtz Association of German Research Centres (HGF) and integrated into the GFZ in a swift, transparent, and structured process.

The process of integrating the IASS into the GFZ and the Helmholtz research field “Earth and Environment”, which began in summer 2021, was largely shaped by the research institutions involved and their employees. A steering group – comprising members of management from the IASS, the GFZ and the Helmholtz research fields “Earth and Environment”, “Energy” and “Information” – was established to jointly manage the integration process. An integration committee – comprising of the Institute’s area speakers and the programme and topic spokespersons of the aforementioned research areas – was also established in 2022 to guide the Institute’s scientific integration. The committee identified potential interfaces, established thematic and personal points of contact and coordinated joint activities in order to create a framework for exchange and initiate cooperation. Joint workshops enabled researchers to identify opportunities for collaboration at an early stage. The scientific integration process will be completed with the Institute’s transition to Programme-oriented Funding (PoF) V at the end of 2027.

| 1 Bericht des Bundesministeriums für Bildung und Forschung und des Ministeriums für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kultur des Landes Brandenburg zur Umsetzung der Empfehlungen aus der Stellungnahme des Wissenschaftsrates zum Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies e.V. (IASS), Potsdam, vom 23. April 2021 (Drs. 8956-21).

The Institute's legal integration (effective from 1 January 2023) was implemented through a transfer agreement concluded between the IASS and the GFZ. In particular, the Institute's assets were transferred to the GFZ, contracts and liabilities were assumed and employment relationships were transferred from the IASS to the GFZ. The continuation of ongoing third-party funded projects was also ensured by transferring them to the GFZ.

The structural recommendations of the Science Council were carefully considered in the establishment of the RIFS. According to its statutes, the purpose of the Institute is to conduct transdisciplinary and transformative sustainability research, to develop and test co-creative processes for policy and societal consulting, and to promote scientific exchange at the national and international levels – including through its Fellow Programme. RIFS will maintain and build upon the multifunctional character that distinguished the IASS – as acknowledged by the Science Council – integrating transfer, consulting and research activities at the interface of science, politics, business and society. The adoption of a new name as part of this reorganisation also follows the recommendation of the Science Council.

B.II RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Focus of work

With regard to the other recommendations of the Science Council, the BMBF and MWFK emphasise that these were instrumental in shaping the Institute's transition to a new institutional form. This effort focused substantially on improving the coherence and strategic direction of the research programme, in line with the Science Council's recommendations. As part of this process, lower rated research groups were either dissolved or reorganised within a year of the Institute's evaluation by the Science Council. In order to further strengthen thematic coherence and collaboration across research areas, a new integration mechanism was introduced in the form of an annual thematic focus (focal topics). Other measures included the development and adoption of a formal definition of sustainability and overarching research questions to guide work at the Institute, and establishing defined fields of focus within the research areas.

Since 2021, the Institute has undertaken various structural reforms to enhance the coherence of its research programme. The Institute has restructured its organisation, adopting clearly defined, overarching objectives for both its research and its advisory work for policymakers and society. As part of these reforms, the number of research areas—now called “research themes”—has been reduced from six to three, and the number of research groups has been streamlined from 24 to 16. RIFS now focuses on three research themes: “Sustainability Transformations and Society”, “Transforming Human-Earth Interactions” and “Advancing Transdisciplinarity and Co-creation”. This thematic focus strengthens the coherence of research at the Institute and fosters collaboration between research groups and projects. As recommended by the Science Council, RIFS is concentrating on topics in which it possesses profound expertise.

The research groups primarily focus on a single topic, but also contribute to at least one of the other research themes. Cooperation within the research themes is promoted through regular internal seminars or workshops, for example. Research groups also cooperate across the boundaries of their designated research themes to address one or more of RIFS's overarching research questions. Research themes are represented by their speakers (2 per theme) on the Research Integration Committee, the Institute's forum for research coordination and exchange. In line with the recommendations of the Science Council, the Institute regularly organises workshops in various formats to consolidate findings from its research themes and identify knowledge and methodologies that can be applied across its activities.

The research theme “Advancing Transdisciplinarity and Co-creation” plays a prominent role and the Institute anticipates that it will make significant contributions to theory-building in transdisciplinary research and the toolbox of methodologies applied at RIFS.

RIFS is also continuing its efforts to attract more competitive third-party funding. With ten projects totalling EUR 5.1 million, it has been very successful, particularly at EU level.

The Fellow Programme

The fellowship programme established at the IASS was retained when the Institute joined the HGF. In 2024, a total of 20 fellows financed by the Institute worked at RIFS. Over half of these fellows were women. Eleven fellows, six of whom were women, held Senior Fellow status. A process to appoint fellows by invitation has been developed and will be trialled early next year, as recommended by the Science Council.

Its integration into the HGF has enabled RIFS to initiate a number of new collaborations and establish a strong network within the organisation. This will benefit efforts to promote transdisciplinary research within the HGF. Most recently, in March 2024, RIFS was accepted as an institutional member of the *Gesellschaft für transdisziplinäre und partizipative Forschung e. V.*. Notably, RIFS hosts three platforms that address topics around sustainable development – the State of Brandenburg’s Sustainability Platform and Sustainability Advisory Board, the Science Platform Sustainability 2030, and the Franco-German Forum for the Future. These platforms maintain direct cooperative ties at the science-policy-society interface at the state, federal and European levels.

Quality assurance

Following the positive assessment by the Science Council of the IASS’s Scientific Advisory Board and its contributions to internal reform processes and quality assurance, efforts are underway to establish an advisory board for RIFS. This new body, which will be constituted shortly, will comprise ten members and will advise the Institute’s leadership on key matters such as the fundamental direction of the Institute, the focus of its transdisciplinary and transformative policy and societal advisory activities, and its cooperation with national and international institutions. In line with the recommendations of the Science Council, the RIFS Advisory Board will share responsibility for ensuring the quality of the Institute’s scientific work. In addition to this, RIFS has created a new position for a Quality Development and Evaluation Officer within its unit for Strategic Science Management..

Organization and equipment

The Institute’s leadership team has been streamlined and now consists of two scientific directors – one with expertise in the natural sciences and the other in the social sciences. Both participate as members in the GFZ Directors’ Meeting. The Institute’s leadership is supported in its work by the Research Integration Committee (RIC), which includes the speakers of the scientific organisational units as well as the heads of Strategic Science Management, the Fellow Programme and Press & Communications. The RIC provides strategic advice on research, policy and societal advisory activities and other key concerns

Half of the scientific leadership roles at the level of the research groups are currently occupied by women and half by men.

In conclusion, the BMBF and MWFK note that efforts to further refine the Institute's profile, integrate its scientific activities into the HGF, and ensure quality assurance are ongoing processes which are now largely guided by HGF regulations. The RIFS will be evaluated within the HGF for the first time in June 2025. This evaluation will be carried out separately from the GFZ and initially outside the PoF system. Nevertheless, RIFS is already involved in strategic planning processes for the next phase of the PoF. In the wake of its successful institutional transition, structural reforms, thematic development and efforts to strengthen its profile, it is anticipated that RIFS will continue on its successful path through to the commencement of PoF V in 2028.

C. Statement

The German Council of Science and Humanities commends the funding bodies and RIFS for successfully implementing the majority of its recommendations from 2021.

The integration of RIFS into the HGF, which began in 2021, established a clear institutional development perspective for the Institute within the near term. The transparent design and active involvement of staff have been notable strengths in this process. The Science Council explicitly welcomes the continued multifunctional role of the Institute, which encompasses transfer, advisory activities, and research at the intersection of science, politics, business, and society. The new name, Research Institute for Sustainability, reflects the evolution of the function and profile of the former IASS.

The Science Council also commends RIFS's efforts to improve the coherence of its research and work programme. The reduction in the number of research areas (themes) and the adoption of clear goals for both research and advisory activities are among the steps already taken in this direction. The Council encourages RIFS to continue along this path. This includes fostering intensive exchange between research groups in order to better utilise the potential of the Institute's research and transfer projects. While the Council supports the idea of rotating focal topics, it recommends that the Institute reassess the frequency at which these topics change and, if necessary, extending the intervals.

The Science Council commends RIFS on the successful acquisition of various EU research grants and encourages the Institute to systematically continue its efforts to obtain DFG and EU third-party funding.

The implementation report does not address the promotion of early-career researchers. The Science Council therefore reiterates its recommendation that RIFS move quickly to develop a structured programme for doctoral candidates and collaborate with universities in the region and beyond to deliver it. At least one of the supervisors should be among the more experienced researchers at RIFS. Furthermore, RIFS should establish a position within its administrative arm to support doctoral candidates and coordinate its doctoral programme.

The Council of Science and Humanities strongly endorses the Institute's decision to retain its fellowship programme and welcomes the planned trial of a personal invitation process to attract high-profile researchers. This process should also serve to attract researchers from underrepresented countries and professionals from the business sector. The Science Council encourages RIFS to leverage insights from the trial phase to further develop and refine the Fellow Programme.

The diverse opportunities for collaboration available within the HGF offer a strong foundation, particularly given the wide-ranging disciplinary expertise necessary to address RIFS's research agenda. At the same time, the Science Council encourages the Institute to expand its network beyond the HGF by engaging in strategic partnerships. The development of a cooperation strategy, as recommended in the 2021 evaluation, and the adoption of a procedure to identify suitable researchers from both domestic and international institutions could lay the groundwork for this.

The Council of Science and Humanities considers it essential that the Institute continues to maintain an independent, scientific advisory body. It therefore supports the Institute's plan to establish an advisory board that will assist its leadership in shaping the Institute's strategic direction and maintaining the quality of its scientific work. As recommended in 2021, RIFS and its new advisory board should further develop the indicators previously designed by the IASS and its advisory board to measure and assess its transfer activities. These indicators should be complemented by qualitative evaluation criteria and surveys of partners from the field.

The proposal, endorsed by the Science Council in 2021, to streamline the Institute's leadership and introduce a second management tier have been implemented. The Science Council welcomes these changes and the achieved equal representation of women and men in the leadership of the Institute's research groups.

In light of the Institute's integration into the Helmholtz Association, the Council of Science and Humanities reiterates its recommendation that the joint appointments, previously granted on a fixed-term basis, be made permanent, with a tenure track established for junior professorships.

BMBF	Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung
DFG	Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
EU	Europäische Union
GFZ	GeoForschungsZentrum
HGF	Hermann von Helmholtz-Gemeinschaft Deutscher Forschungszentren
IASS	Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies e. V.
MWFK	Ministerium für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kultur des Landes Brandenburg
PoF	Programmorientierte Förderung
RIFS	Forschungsinstitut für Nachhaltigkeit – Helmholtz-Zentrum Potsdam (Research Institute for Sustainability – Helmholtz Centre Potsdam)
WR	Wissenschaftsrat

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The following pages list the individuals who participated in consultations within the Science Council and the Evaluation Committee, as well as staff members of the secretariat involved in the development of this report.

Drafts prepared by working groups in the course of evaluations and institutional accreditations are discussed in the commissions of the WR and revised where necessary. As a result, the WR is considered the author of the final statement.

Evaluations of institutions and institutional accreditations are conducted in accordance with the established procedures of the Science Council. This entails a two-stage process that distinguishes between expert reviews and scientific policy statements. Once approved by the evaluation group, the findings of expert reviews may not be subsequently altered. The responsible committee drafts its scientific policy statement on the basis of the expert review, incorporating overarching and comparative aspects, and summarizes the most important recommendations from its perspective.

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Dr. Eva Maria Werner (Deputy Head of Department)