

# Funding Diversity

Strategic Considerations and Measures





## Background and Types

For some time now, “diversity” has been increasingly discussed by various segments of society. The Volkswagen Foundation, too, is addressing this cross-cutting topic within its activities. In its statement on science and innovation policy during the 2021–2025 legislative session, the Alliance of Science Organisations described a “vision” of “science in society” with diversity and inclusion “prerequisites for a multiplicity of ideas” and sees science organizations challenged to promote them.<sup>1</sup> The Association of German Foundations is also addressing the topic in a working group on diversity, and last year the German Research Foundation (DFG) expanded its “Research-Oriented Equity Standards” to “Research-Oriented Equity and Diversity Standards.” At the federal level, with regard to legality and policy, the General Equal Treatment Act and the commitment to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN 2030 Agenda clearly mandate the “creation of equal societies” described by the EU Commission. The main challenge is to establish appropriate measures to reduce and overcome the structural disadvantages of various social groups and individuals and ensure equal opportunities for all.

In the field of science, science policy, and especially science funding, this stocktaking has led to the guideline that no one’s scientific career should be disadvantaged because of non-scientific factors: in science, equal opportunities should prevail.

Besides the social dimension of diversity in science funding, advocating a diverse science system is justified in purely epistemic terms. Diversity contributes to a more effective science system by harnessing the potential of more people for scientific research. Barriers discouraging or preventing members of certain groups from conducting research can cause the exclusion of some of the best and cleverest scientific minds. Increasing diversity in the science system enlarges the pool of potentially talented scientists.

Increasing diversity in science can also increase the objectivity of research. This line of reasoning assumes that different life experiences, values, and interests influence the hypotheses that individual scientists make, the methods and analytical categories they select, and the background assumptions and data explanations they deem reasonable. It is hard to know if individual researchers’ personal backgrounds influence their premises and approaches because the variety of assumptions applied to a specific context are not always evident. A diverse community of researchers can help foster objectivity in the science system and reduce the negative influences of research biases.

---

<sup>1</sup> Alliance of Science Organisations: Statement of 9 June 2021 (<https://www.allianz-der-wissenschaftsorganisationen.de/topics-statements/>). Retrieved on 17 April 2023).



This is why the Volkswagen Foundation sees the need to discuss diversity with respect to its activities. Thus far its equality policies have mostly considered gender; separate dimensions of diversity have not been systematically addressed, but rather ad hoc and case by case. When appointing selection committees, the normal practice has been to attempt to ensure gender balance, and increasingly, include members at different career phases. The gender ratio of applicants and grantees is recorded in each call for proposals and reported in the decision documents. One criterion for funding science events (such as scoping workshops or symposia) is having a gender-balanced group, and thus far it has been possible to apply for funds to cover childcare costs as part of individual funding and as funding for science events.

## **Appreciating diversity: The Volkswagen Foundation's strategic goals**

### **The meaning of diversity**

The Volkswagen Foundation basically understands “diversity” as any form of human variety. Besides its principled commitment to diversity, the Foundation also distinguishes which specific dimensions of diversity will be actively considered for future activities. Many manifestations of social diversity appear to be structurally neutral because they do not systematically grant individuals advantages or disadvantages with respect to their social participation. However, other forms of diversity, such as gender and ethnic origin, often imply structural inequalities and both implicit and explicit discrimination. To systematically enhance diversity and ensure equal opportunities for all, the structural social inequalities must first be recognized and the related dimensions of diversity addressed.

The Foundation observes the General Equal Treatment Act and adds the dimension of social background. In the future, the Foundation will consider these aspects of diversity:

- gender
- sexual identity
- handicap
- age
- ethnicity
- religion or worldview
- social background (family educational level, financial resources, economic situation, asylum, or refugee status; being an immigrant or their descendant)



The Foundation's key concern for gender equality appears to be but one major aspect of equality. While the Foundation will continue to view gender equality as a crucial and distinctive objective (as recommended by the SDGs, which view gender equality and overcoming inequality as two separate goals), it will henceforth consider gender as one of many dimensions of diversity.

Identifying additional forms of diversity inevitably creates tension, first of all because each categorization is of necessity too simple, and grouping people by specific characteristics can engender those very manifestations of inequality that are intended to be eliminated. At the same time, however, diagnosing and addressing extant structural inequalities requires analytically differentiating the various dimensions of diversity. The Foundation considers it crucial for each applicant to voluntarily divulge the amount of information they see fit. It will not always be possible to reach consensus on all the dimensions of diversity that cause significant social inequalities. Discussing each admittedly imprecise dimension, along with the total set of attributes, will be controversial. But rather than abandoning its efforts to eliminate inequality and discrimination in general, the Foundation believes that the tensions resulting from constant critical reflection can be productively used to further develop its approach.

### **The Volkswagen Foundation's strategic goals**

The Volkswagen Foundation's overall strategic goal is to anchor diversity throughout the organization. This involves:

1. contributing to a diverse science system through activities that consider aspects of diversity in external communications, and project and individual assessments, as well as in the specific elements and forms of support.
2. continually reflecting on and refining internal standards and processes with respect to possible structural inequalities and discrimination.
3. considering diversity as key to the Foundation's personnel and organizational development.

Elaborating this strategy and the specific measures to be used should not be regarded as a one-off and final step. In fact, they represent the beginning of a process of continual reflection, impact assessment, and evolution, in which the Foundation's activities will be redirected at different times with respect to the various dimensions of diversity. In keeping with the Foundation's aims and identity, scientific excellence will remain the most important evaluation criterion.



## Implementing the first measures

An Equal Opportunities Module (working title) will be developed for each form of research funding to allow Volkswagen Foundation grantees to access additional funds for diversity measures for their projects. This module aims to help decentralize measures to compensate individual researchers' disadvantages (such as funding for childcare, technical support for physical restrictions, and coaching and mentoring services). It should also be possible to implement measures that address diversity as a whole (as in awareness-raising workshops for research project participants). This module will be developed in exchange with the DFG, which has a similar program for equal opportunity funding, so that we can learn from their experience before implementing our own program.

Aspects of diversity are to be explicitly considered when reviewing funding requests. The main objective of this measure is to compensate for individual limitations or delays in applicants' research careers that may result from one of these dimensions of diversity. To this end, all of the Foundation's future funding initiatives will use contextualized CVs that allow applicants to decide the appropriate and relevant information to share with the Foundation and reviewers. Experience with this format has been collected through the "Momentum – Funding for the First-Called," "Circularity with Recycled and Biogenic Resources," and "Researching Research: Cooperative Projects" funding initiatives. In addition, the relevance of diversity should be reflected upon and included in each individual research application (for example, with respect to the research object, approach, or methodology).

Diversity awareness measures and training (such as sessions on diversity awareness and skills building) should be conducted for the entire organization. Competency should be built through targeted recruiting and personnel development measures to make the Foundation's external communications more diverse and also take diversity into account when developing funding initiatives and organizing events, as well as with respect to in-house cooperation (diversity management).

The Volkswagen Foundation wishes to exchange with other actors in the field of science funding. Regarding the cross-sectional field of diversity, the foundation will regularly compare notes with organizations like the DFG, the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung, the Junge Akademie (an interdisciplinary research platform for next generation academics), the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF), and others.



## Imprint

### **Publisher**

VolkswagenStiftung  
Kastanienallee 35  
30519 Hanover  
Germany  
[www.volkswagenstiftung.de](http://www.volkswagenstiftung.de)

### **Responsible**

Jens Rehländer,  
Communication Manager

Hanover, September 2023