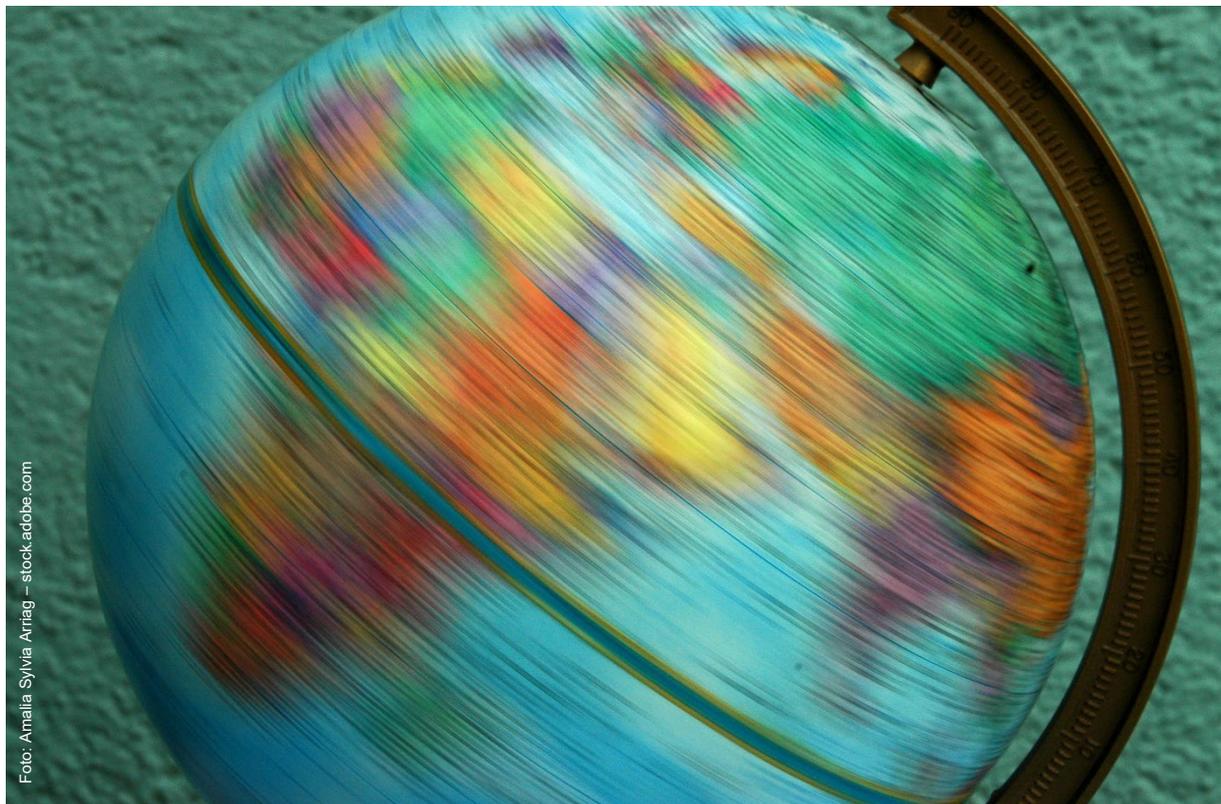


Supporting Science Internationally

Between Globalism and New Boundaries –
The Volkswagen Foundation's International Strategy



I. The Volkswagen Foundation's history and experience of international funding

Since beginning funding activities, the Volkswagen Foundation has attached particular importance to international cooperation. In the 1960s, for example, it supported scientific relations between Germany and Israel even before the two countries established diplomatic ties. From 1964 to 1987, it sponsored cooperative research in East Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and North America, while in the 1980s and 1990s, it encouraged collaboration between researchers in Germany and China.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the early 1990s the Foundation launched several cooperative programs with scientists in Central and Eastern Europe. Around the turn of this century, those were replaced by initiatives to fund cooperation with the successor states of the Soviet Union in Central Asia/the Caucasus and countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. In late 2021, after some 20 years, both programs were discontinued.

Starting in 2011, all transnational activities were grouped under "International Funding." Besides the cross-border composition of research consortia, internationalism has become more and more evident in all funding areas: from appointing groups of international experts to discuss new funding initiatives to creating international review panels, and cooperating with foundations abroad. It has pursued the following goals:

- strengthening the German scientific community's international contacts and *research networks*.
- working together on transnational and interdisciplinary research on the global challenges that require cross-border collaboration.
- orienting Foundation activities to countries whose outstanding research make them interesting collaborators (*excellence*).
- facilitating scientific contacts in politically sensitive situations: building bridges of trust through "science diplomacy."
- reinforcing scholarship in countries of the Global South through human and institutional capacity building (*sustainable development*).

II. New international challenges for science

The Volkswagen Foundation's approach has produced good results. In recent years, however, scientific research has had to deal with huge global changes that affect international cooperation and international funding. The long-term impacts of the current war in Europe are not foreseeable but the collision of free scientific exchange with despotism has already shown the limits of science diplomacy. In any case, research cooperation helps to establish communication channels in civil society that build trust. This has been exemplified in recent years by the Foundation's support for trilateral partnerships between researchers from Germany, Russia, and Ukraine.

Three important developments posing new challenges for international scientific collaboration should be mentioned.

As the corona pandemic made glaringly obvious, all spheres of life have become

increasingly networked over many decades. Scientific research has also become more internationally connected, facilitated by digital technologies that rapidly generate new knowledge globally. Recently, however, contradictory trends have also become apparent, with ideological distinctions and power politics creating new barriers to the free exchange of people and knowledge, and the use of cutting-edge digital technologies as the medium and a factor in these exchanges. China, for example, has established itself as an important player in scientific research but does not respect Western values of academic freedom. How should we deal with such a partner? How should we respond to overt or covert censorship, and different understandings of intellectual property?

New technology-driven forms of knowledge production are confronted by new cases of political competition that are reshaping and restraining science systems worldwide. This impacts both individual international scientific collaboration and institutional contacts. As a whole, the academic landscape has only partly responded to this trend by maintaining, establishing, and expanding regional scientific and cultural competencies. The emergency situation of refugee scientists creates additional, and new, scientific and humanitarian challenges for national science systems and research funding.

That said, science must continue to provide the knowledge needed for coping with urgent global challenges such as the consequences of climate change. These matters require an international approach and often transnational cooperation. Which types of collaboration are most suitable for sustainably responding to these pressing questions and contributing to society's well-being?

III. Objectives of the Volkswagen Foundation's international research funding

These new conditions require the Volkswagen Foundation to review and redefine its position on internationalism and also its funding strategy. All in all, the Foundation's international activities are clearly geared to the preservation of democratic values and support for ethical academic freedom. Along with other institutions promoting science, the Foundation must constantly reflect on how it deals with autocracies such as China and Russia, identify ways to collaborate, and to mark its red lines.

Three profile areas – “Understanding Research,” “Exploration,” and “Societal Transformations” – create the framework for developing the Foundation's international funding activities.

1. International contacts and networks are key to implementing the main goal of “**Understanding Research**” – improving the structural framework for research and teaching in Germany. To this end, the Foundation plans to:

- expand exchanges with international research funders, for example by participating in the Research on Research Institute (RoRI), an international consortium to test and facilitate innovative approaches to science funding that features a comparable database.
- promote international cooperative research-on-research projects to enable scholars in Germany to collaborate with leading international partners, especially in Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia, and Japan in this traditional, albeit fragmented, area, and help them pursue innovative and internationally

competitive paths in science studies in Germany.

- examine other science systems and cultures to learn about best practices and critical developments.
- contribute to mapping the international science landscape by supporting the Academic Freedom Index on the freedom to create knowledge.

2. In “**Exploration**,” the Foundation promotes outstanding research in all disciplines, including innovative and daring research ideas. The Foundation will therefore focus its support for international collaborations by:

- attracting creative and stimulating partners to identify new and risky research directions and topics, for example, in thematic weeks and research workshops.
- enabling outstanding research by collaborating with the best international partners.
- stimulating innovation by networking with the world’s best and most creative scientists and scholars, especially in research fields not yet or insufficiently noticed.
- increasing Germany’s attractiveness as a science location by developing new formats for international cooperation on pioneering subjects.

3. “**Societal Transformations**” mainly concerns producing knowledge about major current and future challenges and developing ways to deal with them. This often calls for a global perspective and cross-border cooperation. The Volkswagen Foundation

- will seek scientifically proven and internationally recognized expertise to identify the research subjects relevant to societal transformation processes, such as the relationship between environment and health.
- will consider temporary collaboration with regions, including in the Global South, on specific research topics.
- will formulate standards with international partners about the quality of scientific collaboration for specific funding offers that specify the cooperation goals in the application. Necessary funding will be provided for exploring the potential for cooperating, providing incentives to continue successful international collaborations after projects end, and sharing experiences with other partners.
- will collaborate more with international foundation initiatives, such as UNLEASH, which offers programs for youth on innovation and sustainability, and the Research Forum of Philea (Philanthropy Europe Association), in order to promote international exchange between young researchers and other societal stakeholders.

4. Responding to the dramatic changes in international relations of recent years, the Volkswagen Foundation will keep helping scientists and scholars in dire need to continue research outside their home countries. For that, it will seek close cooperation with other research funding bodies and government agencies.

5. Science funding can only maintain high international standards by involving experts from the science systems of other countries in the funding applications and final assessments. To this end, the Foundation will continue to bring in reviewers from other countries and where advisable, increase their numbers.

6. In its cross-cutting areas, for example, the organization of events at Schloss

Herrenhausen and elsewhere, inhouse and external communication, and impact analysis, the Foundation will draw on and compare other countries' best practices.

7. To achieve these goals, the Volkswagen Foundation will continue and expand its cooperation with other foundations, including Wellcome, Novo Nordisk Fonden, and Riksbankens Jubileumsfond.