Dear applicants,

At the beginning of 2018, the Centre for Social Investment (CSI) at the University of Heidelberg invited you to participate in an online survey as part of the "Learning from Partners" research project. Together with seven other foundations (including Stiftung Mercator, Fritz Thyssen Stiftung and Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt), the Volkswagen Foundation supported this third survey in the context of the project.

The aim of the study was to obtain meaningful feedback from the applicants on the foundation in general and their funding activities. The survey provided a lot of positive feedback on the Foundation's procedures and staff. However, it also showed indications for improvements. Over the past few months, the Foundation has had intensive discussions about your assessments and suggestions as well as possible implementations. We would now like to inform you about the current state of affairs:

We were very pleased with your positive assessment of our administrative processes. This confirms that we are on the right track to keep the administrative burden of an application as low as possible by continuously optimizing our procedures. Through the digitization of all phases of our funding activities, from application through assessment to reporting, the various portals now enable lean procedures and clear framework conditions for each user. At the same time, we strive for the greatest possible flexibility in all areas, because we know that good science, above all, often brings surprises with it, which requires appropriate adaptation on our part.

We got critical feedback with regard to the communication of reasons for rejection of unsuccessful applications. We take this feedback very seriously, as this topic was already addressed in previous surveys and we had set ourselves the goal of becoming more transparent and comprehensible. However, the review procedures practiced by the Foundation only partially allow for detailed feedback. More and more funding initiatives now use a two-stage review procedure.
In a first peer review meeting the most promising applicants or consortia will be identified and invited to a presentation. In this second stage, the short votes of the reviewers submitted in advance of the first meeting form the basis for structuring and focusing the second meeting. The focus here is on the projects that have been positively or heterogeneously reviewed and on formulating expert advice. Projects, which have been negatively assessed in advance are usually no longer discussed in detail.

Experience shows that this procedure optimally combines efficiency in view of the limited resources of the reviewers and the required interdisciplinary perspective. In comparison to the written individual assessments interdisciplinary review panels are better able to deal with unusual scientific combinations. However, we are aware that in some cases the limited feedback on the content of the proposals may be unsatisfactory for the applicants. Therefore, we communicate this fact in advance in order to avoid irritations. In addition, the responsible program managers are always available for consultation and can provide oral information about the review process. In the case of a very high number of short applications, detailed content feedback is not always possible. In any case, however, information can be provided on positioning of a project in the overall rating. In future, we will refer to this possibility even more explicitly in the rejection letters and revise again the corresponding information on the homepage.

In addition, the survey asked about the extent to which support from the Volkswagen Foundation can contribute to capacity building. We were pleased to receive positive feedback here, but also note that some offers and support options are only insufficient known. For example, we have expanded our activities with the XPLANATORIUM in Schloss Herrenhausen and offer a wide range of opportunities for exchange - both within the scientific community and with a wider public. Here we will intensify our efforts to strengthen targeted communication. We will also be happy to assist you with your ideas for events and networking opportunities in Herrenhausen.

In comparison to the second round of the survey, the consent to the statement support from the Foundation is a sign of quality declined. At the same time, funding by the Foundation seems to make a significant contribution to enhancing the reputation of the individual researcher(s). These statements must certainly be viewed in a differentiated manner.

We are aware that in times of ratings and rankings, aspects such as the granting of overheads or the participation in large consortia of public sponsors are additional quality or performance characteristics from a structural point of view in addition to pure scientific success.
We will continue to monitor the effects of our funding and would like to remain in dialogue with our partners on how we can contribute to ensuring that all stakeholders benefit equally from our funding initiatives.

If you took part in the survey, thank you very much again. Only through your feedback will we be able to align our procedures and our information and communication behavior even better to your needs as an applicant.

Yours sincerely,

Wilhelm Krull