

'Freigeist' Fellowships – FAQ

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Advice: First carefully read the 'Information for Applicants' and the FAQs. Then, before completing your application, consult the Foundation's program director responsible for your discipline. Do this by email, being sure to include a detailed CV with a list of publications and a brief statement "Why Freigeist?".

Humanities and Social Sciences: brumberg@volkswagenstiftung.de

Natural, life, and engineering sciences: grewe@volkswagenstiftung.de

1. Who can be considered a 'Freigeist' in the spirit of this call?

A 'Freigeist' Fellowship enables you to go about what *you* find absolutely important and exciting – and what could become the pivotal step for a successful career in the academia. In some respects the 'Freigeist' Fellowships constitute a counterpoint to the formation of large collaborative research units and priority themes that are likely to offer junior researchers less scope for individual initiative and creativity, thus constraining the development of any personal unique selling point. We are strongly encouraging you to explore new territories so that you as a 'Freigeist' Fellow – ideally - function as a catalyst for the emergence of new fields of research.

The Freigeist Fellowships are a special offer that places especially high demands on applicants and their projects – accordingly, not every research project fits in with the initiative. The following questions may serve as a first orientation for your self-assessment and whether the nature of your project matches the orientation of the funding initiative:

- In which way does your research profile and personality indicate a „Freigeist“ (e. g. showing an exceptional open-mindedness, independence or unconventional career) – and how would a Fellowship support the further development of your profile?
- What is exceptional or original about your proposed project and/or the methods you intend to apply?
- In what way does your proposed project constitute a break with the mainstream and show it is your own original research idea?
- Why do you want to do your research independently? To what extent do you contradict established concepts?
- How do you creatively confront the unexpected and deal with unforeseen circumstances?
- What is the visionary potential of the proposed project and to what extent does it reach beyond the “next logical step”? Does it for instance represent a new area of research, entail an unexpected shift in perspectives, or cut across disciplines or methods in an innovative way?
- What would be the consequences if your idea were to “fail resoundingly”? How would it still contribute to knowledge or open a window for further research?

2. What criteria do the reviewers take into consideration?

Beside scientific quality, the reviewers are interested in the originality of the proposed project as well as the project match to the orientation of the funding initiative: In other words, aspects that are not necessarily connected with their previous research record. Applicants must be

able to show that they are capable of developing and implementing an unconventional research project in keeping with the spirit of the Freigeist Fellowship initiative. The project must not bear any similarity with the applicant's doctoral dissertation nor should it continue research of the same topic. It must be clearly visible that the applicant is able to do his/her research independently.

3. Can applicants from all disciplines apply?

Yes, the Freigeist Fellowships focus on postdoctoral researchers from all disciplines. The initiative is thematically open and there are no subject-related quotas: The decision to grant funding depends solely on the quality and project match to the aims of the funding initiative. The Foundation especially welcomes project proposals from the humanities and social sciences.

4. Can applicants of all nationalities apply?

Yes, the funding scheme is open to early-stage researchers of all nationalities. Applicants must, however, be integrated within a university or an extra-mural research institution in Germany from the beginning of the fellowship.

5. How is the four-year period calculated?

At least one year and no more than four years should have elapsed since award of the applicant's doctorate. The four-year period is calculated by considering the date of the thesis defense or doctoral viva in relation to the application deadline.

For applicants with two doctorates the four-year period is calculated on the basis of the thesis defense or doctoral viva being more relevant for the proposed research project.

6. Can periods of parental leave or non-academic employment be credited to the four-year deadline?

Yes. Time for parental leave or for non-academic employment can be added to the four-year period after completion of the doctoral dissertation. Applicants are advised to seek clarification before submitting their proposals.

7. What does the requested change of the academic environment imply?

The requested change of the academic environment implies that applicants – as a general rule – cannot conduct the 'Freigeist' Fellowship within the personal and institutional working context of their doctoral thesis. A central criterion of the Freigeist initiative is the Fellow's independence; the funding scheme enables early-stage researchers to emancipate themselves from their doctoral supervisor and develop an individual research profile. Furthermore, in our opinion a successful scientific career requires your proven ability to work in different academic environments.

8. In how far can research sojourns abroad be integrated into the proposed research project?

Integrated research sojourns abroad are possible and explicitly welcomed but should not account for more than two years of the initial funding period. Being associated with a university or research institution in Germany is obligatory also during the research sojourn abroad.

9. Is one eligible to apply if one is already a junior group leader or holds a junior professorship?

An application of junior group leaders or junior professors is only possible in case he/she will resign from his/her current position to start a completely new 'Freigeist' project at a new institution. The funding, enlargement or extension of an existing junior research group is not possible.

10. Can a Freigeist Fellowship serve solely to provide resources for a professorship?

No, this is not possible. In order to ensure the fellow's independence, a Freigeist Fellowship always includes funding from the Foundation for the Fellow's position.

11. Why are the Freigeist Fellowships flexible in terms of time and finances?

Exceptional research projects require varying framework conditions, which is why the Freigeist Fellowship incorporates great flexibility in terms of timeframe and the funding amount. It is the responsibility of the applicant to adapt the funding and duration of funding requested to the specifics and requirements of the respective research project.

12. Why is the maximum amount of funding so high, and how is the funding amount determined for individual applications?

The maximum amount of funding is deliberately kept high in order to offer support for innovative and risk-prone research projects that require expensive resources. It has absolutely no negative impact on the review process when projects are proposed that require less than 1 million euro. The decisive factor is the conclusiveness of the submitted cost calculation with regard to the proposed project. There are no specific funding limits related to the field of research or to the discipline.

13. What determines the duration of the first and second funding phases?

Proposals can foresee a first funding phase of five or six years. On the one hand, this allows the opportunity to choose the funding period according to the requirements of the respective research project. On the other hand, it makes it possible for the fellow to be appointed as a W1 junior professor: Such professorships are funded by the Fellowship for six years. The chosen duration of funding must be justified in the application and based on a work schedule

and the requisite institutional commitment of the university management to establish an additional W1 junior professorship.

In the event that the host institution agrees to provide a permanent position for the Fellow, a second funding phase of two or three years can be applied for. The duration depends on the length of the first funding phase, as the maximum funding period is eight years.

14. What should be considered when applying for the Fellow position?

If a position as a W1 junior professor is requested, the budget calculation may include the following: "Grundgehalt", "Familienzulage" (if applicable), "Leistungszulage" (if applicable), "Sonderzulage" (if applicable). "Versorgungszuschläge" will not be covered by the Foundation. Details may be discussed with the "Drittmittelverwaltung"/Research Support Service of the host institution.

If the Fellow does not apply for a W1 junior professor position, remuneration will be based on salary scale 14 or 15 under the Collective Agreement for the Public Sector (TV-L) or a comparable collective agreement that is customary at the hosting institution. This classification results from the particular academic qualifications and high-quality research performance required to carry out the difficult tasks associated with the Freigeist project. If the Fellow heads a research group and thus bears responsibility for personnel, classification according to TV-L E 15 is expected. In general, the Foundation assumes that Freigeist Fellows receive the same status as other junior research group leaders at the respective institution. The following average rates should be used as a guideline when applying:

- TV-L E14 (or TVöD E 14) 80,400 euro / year
- TV-L E15 (or TVöD E 15) 84,000 euro / year

15. What must be considered when applying for personnel funds?

In any case, please, use the average rates for personnel costs provided in the Electronic Application System (in the form "Budget") for calculating personnel funds.

Positions for doctoral students have a term of three years. They are assigned to group 13. Usually, 65 % of a full position will be funded. In exceptional cases other percentages may be granted, according to the conventions in the respective discipline. In such cases, applications should include an explanation.

PostDoc positions are also assigned to group 13. The candidates should be provided with a solid career perspective within the project. Short-term employments (of less than one year) are incompatible with this idea.

As a basic principle, the Foundation does not grant any scholarships or stipends within the framework of this initiative.

16. What are the rules regarding travel expenses connected with attending conferences?

Fellows can apply for a maximum amount of 2,000 euros/p.a. to cover travel expenses incurred in connection with attending conferences; the maximum amount for PostDocs is 1,500 euros/p.a.; and for PhD candidates it is 1,000 euros/p.a.

17. What must be considered when applying for costs of equipment?

When applying for funds to cover the cost of equipment, be sure not to forget any value-added tax (VAT) that may be due. Likewise, and in particular for equipment supplied from abroad, you must also take possible dispatch costs into account. In the case of equipment invoiced in a foreign currency, you must indicate the exchange rate you take as the basis for your cost calculation. It is quite possible that the exchange rate might change considerably during the selection procedure. By stating the current exchange rate underlying your calculation, you help us to adapt the funding amount (and therefore offset the possibly higher price of the equipment in question). You must obtain a formal offer for any equipment costing more than 10,000 euros. Please take care to ensure that offers for the supply of equipment clearly relate to the respective items as listed in your budget plan and that the amounts agree.

18. What should the substantial contribution of the host institution encompass?

The substantial contribution of the host institution should be structured in such a way that the applicant's (and his/her prospective staffs') general ability to work is guaranteed. Additionally, the contribution should reflect the host institution's self-interest in recruiting the applicant for its own institution.

Depending on the available resources of the institution this support can be granted in different forms and is to be negotiated by the applicant on an individual basis. The institutional support can be provided as a contribution in-kind or via co-financing. Extra-mural research institutions (e. g. Max-Planck-Institutes or Helmholtz Centres) are to contribute 50 percent of the total amount of the project costs (only project-specific costs, cf. no. 11). Here, either the general commitment to provide 50 percent of the total amount of project costs is possible or – as preferred – a breakdown in cost positions funded by the Foundation and cost positions funded by the respective institution. In any case, the fellow's position will be paid by the Foundation.

Your budget plan must include all the direct costs needed to implement the proposed project, including the costs that will be covered by the host institution. The budget plan is thus to accurately reflect the total costs for the entire project. This shall also apply in the event that the host institution contributes a lump sum amount. Lump sums for administrative costs or the costs of infrastructure (rooms, computer(s)) are not deemed to be directly project-related and are therefore not to be included in the budget plan.

19. Does the Foundation grant overheads?

No, the Foundation does not grant any overheads. When calculating the contribution of the host institution, overheads may not be included.

20. Who should issue the binding declaration of the host institution?

As a rule, the declaration by the host institution should be issued by the hosting department/faculty/institute/research center in which the applicant will carry out his/her research. In the event that the agreement concerning the contribution to be provided by the host institution has to be signed by the university management or by a higher instance, this will have to be evidenced by signature(s) [and official stamp] either in the same communication or in an additional document.

There is no form provided by the Foundation. In case the institution is not in the position to issue a declaration in English, a German version is accepted as legally binding. A translation is appreciated.

21. Electronic Application System: What is meant by “Proposed grant recipient”?

If you are currently not affiliated with the institution that will be hosting you as a ‘Freigeist’ Fellow, please use this paragraph for indicating the address of your prospective institution.

Register in our [Electronic Application System](#) at an early stage; that might answer some rather practical questions concerning the application procedure. Intermittently saving your data and files is, of course, possible at all time.

22. Are parallel applications to other research funding organizations permitted?

Proposals may also be submitted to other funding organizations, but this must be indicated in applications to the Foundation.

23. How long will applicants have to wait for a decision?

Generally, the Foundation comes to a decision within nine months after the respective application deadline. Candidates who – due to the reviewers’ assessment of the written application – will not be invited to present their projects, receive a notice approximately six months after the deadline.

24. Can one re-apply following a negative assessment?

Unfortunately, that is not possible. It is also not possible to submit a revised version of the original proposal. We therefore recommend applicants first to obtain advice regarding their proposal as well as the most favorable time to apply.

25. When should a Freigeist Fellowship be started?

Following a positive decision of the Foundation's Board of Trustees, the Freigeist Fellowship should normally start within six months of notification of grant.

26. What else does a Freigeist Fellowship offer?

Networking is especially desirable in order to ensure conferencing among the Freigeist fellows and promote dialogue between grantees and the Foundation. To this end the Foundation organizes and supports regular meetings between the fellows and grantees of other person-related funding initiatives.

In addition, a diverse range of offers of further education, e.g. media training, conflict management, how to recruit staff, is organized with established partners of the Foundation. The aim is to train the communication and management skill-sets and tools needed to independently lead a research group.

For you as a parent

Please have a look at our information on [‘Family-Related Benefits’](#)