

Evaluation der Frontiers of Research-Symposien der Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung

Bericht

Berlin, 20. Februar 2019

für die
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Teil I

Management Summary

In the year 2000, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (hereinafter “Humboldt Foundation“) introduced a program into its portfolio called the Frontiers of Research Symposia (hereinafter “FoR Symposia”), which differs from its other research fellowships and awards programs. With this program, the Humboldt Foundation does not primarily support individual research trips or awards. In annual or biannual symposia it brings together between 40 and 80 scientists from Germany and one partner country. In particular, the interdisciplinary and bi-national exchange on current and future-oriented topics between the scientists and researchers from Germany and a partner country is to be ongoing. This exchange will not only take place during the symposia, but it should also lead to bi-national and interdisciplinary future cooperation following the symposia. The intended target group will be outstanding scientists from the next generation of researchers. Furthermore, the Humboldt Foundation aims to build and maintain partnerships with strategically selected partner countries. Finally, the FoR symposia will establish strategic contacts that will strengthen the Humboldt Foundation's network.

The program, which was included in the Humboldt Foundation's portfolio with a single partner country (USA), has been expanded to include seven other partner countries: Brazil, China, the United Kingdom, India, Israel, Japan and Turkey. A total of eleven symposia were held, which can be defined by the partner country and the scientific field (humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and engineering). The symposia are to be organized each with one partner organization from one of the eight partner countries. Between 2008 and 2017, 3130 scientists participated in the program.

This report presents the results of the external evaluation of the FoR Symposia program between January 2018 and February 2019 for the period from 2008 to 2017. This evaluation assesses the implementation of the FoR symposium program during this period. Additionally, recommendations are presented for the further development of the program. Four key questions have been formulated for the evaluation: (A) To what extent are the program objectives achieved? (B) Which program activities make a particular contribution to the success of the FoR symposia? (C) Which mechanisms of action can be identified through the program? (D) What contributions does the For Symposia program make towards achieving the strategic goals of the Humboldt Foundation?

For the data collection, a mixed-method and cross perspective approach were used. Interviews were conducted with representatives of the Humboldt Foundation, German nominating institutions and foreign partner organizations, as well as with the scientists and scholars of the FoR symposia. Furthermore, all participating scientists from the FoR symposia between 2008 and 2017 were invited to complete an online survey. Additionally, a stakeholders and context analysis, as well as a network analysis were also carried out.

All symposia of the program are based on a uniform concept and follow the same basic principles (in particular interdisciplinarity, bi-nationality across all levels and intermittently rotated). This

uniform concept will be implemented in different contexts with different partners. The analyses show that despite the differences, it is possible to achieve the program goals through the developed activities. A common understanding of the target group and program objectives at the level of the peer group and the scientists has been created, which leads to these objectives being reflected in the different elements of the symposia (selection of participants and themes, the course of the program). The Humboldt Foundation offers many years of experience and ensures continuity.

With the developed program activities, it has been possible to create a forum for interdisciplinary, bi-national, subject-specific and intercultural exchange with the FoR symposia. The different activities in the organization of the symposia complement each other and in their totality lead to a very well -functioning format. The symposia provide the scientists with the opportunity among others for numerous interdisciplinary and intercultural discussions, an extension of their own research horizons and the exploration of topics that they would ordinarily not otherwise have dealt with. The possibilities are appreciated and used by the participating scientists. The combination of these elements in the format of a symposium and the quality of the organization distinguishes the FoR symposia from many other scientific conferences.

However, the Humboldt Foundation not only aims to foster exchange during the symposia, but it also aims to initiate long-term contacts and scientific cooperation. The follow-up program CONNECT was launched for this purpose. This program provides funding assistance for working visits in the partner country for up to 30 days for all participants in the FoR symposia, for example to prepare joint research articles or research projects. This opportunity was used by 9 % of the scientists of the FoR symposia. Regardless of the CONNECT program, there are continuing contacts between scientists and researchers. However, this low percentage was shown to be due to previously including fewer bi-national and interdisciplinary members than the contacts made during the symposium. Among other things, this is due to the combination of the target group (next-generation researchers who are at the beginning of their careers) and the interdisciplinary approach. The data collection shows that the scientists are keen to strengthen the follow up contacts with other participants.

The goals of the FoR symposia program are not limited to the level of scientists. With this program, the Humboldt Foundation also aims to build and maintain partnerships with selected countries. In this respect, this program represents a special opportunity in the Humboldt Foundation's portfolio. Long-term partnerships are being established with organizations in partner countries, and collaboration with the Humboldt Foundation in the framework of the FoR symposia is highly valued by the partner organizations. The goal of building the partnership beyond the program, however, was barely reflected in the partner organizations in the framework of the evaluation and is not deliberately pursued.

The FoR Symposia has created a network over nine countries which is comprised of 3130 scientists and researchers. Due to the special nature of the FoR Symposium program compared to the other programs of the Humboldt Foundation, there are other ways of controlling the formation of the network in this program, which could be used even more systematically and with regard to the strategic goals of the Humboldt Foundation. This applies at the conceptual level, in particular for the selection of partner countries.

Through the FoR symposia, the Humboldt Network has grown from strength to strength and it intends to further expand to include a majority of academics who have never previously participated in a Humboldt Foundation program. The Humboldt Foundation benefits from a positive reputation among the participants of the FoR symposium, even before their participation. In view of the goal of expanding the Humboldt network, contact with FoR alumni could be strengthened. Accordingly, the FoR network could be strengthened in two ways: on the one hand between the scientists, and the other, between the Humboldt Foundation and the scientists and researchers. However, this requires activity from the Humboldt Foundation or the partner organizations.