



Applicants' Views of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

Comments on the Results Report on the Survey
of DFG Applicants

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1 Introduction

The [results report on the Survey of DFG Applicants](#) ("Ergebnisbericht: Befragung der DFG-Antragsteller*innen") by Lennard Liebich, Merle Rohde and Michael Ruland of infas Institut für angewandte Sozialwissenschaft GmbH reflects the keen interest of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) in finding out more about how applicants perceive its work. As both a research funding organisation and the self-governing organisation for science and the humanities in Germany, the DFG regularly reviews its funding activities, procedures and programme portfolio, as well as the way in which it fulfils its other responsibilities under the Statutes. This is based on ongoing feedback from the research community, the review boards and the other statutory bodies with which the DFG Head Office maintains a continuous dialogue, as well as external evaluations of individual programmes.

The DFG commissioned the broad-based applicant survey conducted by infas to supplement these feedback processes with a current and systematically obtained perspective. The survey met with broad approval and support, as demonstrated by the response rate of almost 40 per cent. We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who participated in the survey.

Compared with the last major survey, which the DFG conducted jointly with the Institute for Research Information and Quality Assurance in 2010 ([Böhmer et al. 2011](#), in German), the target group was modified in key respects. While the previous survey focused on professors in Germany, the current survey targeted researchers with doctorates at all types of higher education institution and research institution who had previously submitted a proposal to the DFG. The current survey therefore provides a broader and more differentiated picture of the diverse experiences and assessments of the various groups of people who have been or remain in direct contact with the DFG.

The German research system's heavy dependence on third-party funding means that, as the principal funding organisation for many disciplines, the DFG occupies a special position as both a provider of funding and the body responsible for organising competition for it. This is also reflected in the survey findings: 85 per cent of respondents agree that they would be unable to conduct their research without third-party funding. The survey came at a time when proposal numbers are increasing, budgets are stagnating in real terms and success rates are therefore declining. The resulting pressure on applicants and funding programmes is apparent from respondents' feedback, too.

The survey covered a broad range of topics, including the programme portfolio, motivations for submitting proposals and the conditions governing their submission, review and decision-making processes, project implementation and the DFG's responsibilities. For the first time, the demographic characteristics recorded for applicants also included information on aspects of diversity, such as their parents' educational background and their country of birth, as well as information on personal circumstances such as caring responsibilities for children and others.

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At the same time, the survey was unable to cover every topic that is important now or will become increasingly important in future. This applies particularly to the impact of artificial intelligence on research and research funding and to the changing political and geopolitical conditions.

These comments focus on selected findings, placing these in the context of the DFG's funding activities. It is mainly concerned with three areas of central importance to the DFG: the attractiveness of its funding portfolio, its range of responsibilities, and competition and peer review under conditions of limited resources.

2 Attractiveness of the Funding Portfolio: Breadth and Openness

In accordance with its [statutes](#), the DFG funds "projects developed by the academic community itself in the area of knowledge-driven research" in all disciplines. Accordingly, with the exception of a small number of calls for proposals, its funding programmes are open to all topics and have no submission deadlines. The survey shows that this approach is highly valued: across all disciplines, nine out of ten respondents say that the freedom to choose their own research topic is the most important reason for applying to the DFG. This high level of approval highlights the importance of this funding principle to the research community and reinforces the DFG's commitment to upholding it. The principle also distinguishes the DFG from many other funding organisations.

Individual Research Grants

Within the DFG's funding portfolio, the Research Grants Programme is by far the best known: 84 per cent of respondents are familiar with it from personal experience. Across all scientific disciplines, 96 per cent of respondents state that this programme is suitable for carrying out their own research projects.

The DFG will continue to regard the Research Grants Programme as the backbone of its programme portfolio. With around 13,000 proposals



and almost 4,000 grants awarded each year, the Research Grants Programme occupies a key position in the funding portfolio. Given the broad range of projects funded, it is also a particularly clear embodiment of the principle of funding research without topic restrictions.

Programme Portfolio

Respondents' feedback on the DFG's programme portfolio as a whole is more nuanced. A clear majority believe that there is a need within the research community for each of the various programmes and that each programme covered by the survey is regarded by the majority as an attractive funding opportunity. The flexibility offered by the programmes and the adequacy of the funding are also viewed positively. At the same time, one-third of applicants see gaps in the funding portfolio. These assessments are explained in greater detail in the free-text responses. The funding needs identified particularly frequently by respondents concern opportunities for international cooperation, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research and high-risk research.

Applicants were also asked specifically which funding programmes they believed offered scope for interdisciplinary and high-risk research. A large majority of respondents consider the coordinated programmes suitable for interdisciplinary research, in particular Collaborative Research Centres. The level of approval is lower for individual research grants and programmes for researchers in the early stages of their careers. A more nuanced picture also emerges where respondents were asked whether the programmes are suitable for high-risk research. Individual research grants are most likely to be regarded as suitable in this respect, whereas Research Training Groups are considered less suitable.

The findings point to differing assessments of the opportunities available within the existing funding portfolio for interdisciplinary and high-risk research. It seems reasonable to assume that larger groups of researchers, such as those collaborating in coordinated programmes, are better able than individuals to accommodate research of an interdisciplinary nature. It is also understandable that the aim of training early career researchers in Research Training Groups may be seen as conflicting with the pursuit of high-risk research. The survey does not currently permit any definitive assessment of whether these differences also indicate a need for different funding programmes, different funding conditions or different review formats or criteria. Further analysis of the free-text responses and the differences between the scientific disciplines in particular may subsequently provide additional insights into whether adjustments to the portfolio or individual programmes could create better conditions for proposing and conducting high-risk and/or interdisciplinary projects.

Overall, however, the DFG regards the findings as confirmation that its funding portfolio fundamentally meets researchers' needs. The responses demonstrate a broad consensus regarding the fundamental orientation of the funding portfolio, particularly its openness to all topics and the diversity of the funding opportunities available.

At the same time, the DFG recognises that the programme portfolio does not and cannot meet all expectations equally. In addition, the individual programmes are used and assessed differently across the various scientific disciplines. In the DFG's view, this tension is not coun-

terproductive and should remain. It regards the continuous balancing of the differing requirements and interests arising from disciplinary affiliations, career stages, personal circumstances and affiliations with different types of institution as one of its key responsibilities.

Against this background, too, the DFG considers it important to continue adapting its funding portfolio to the research community's changing requirements while maintaining a balance between the breadth, clarity and distinctive profiles of the funding opportunities available. The question of which funding instruments remain appropriate and responsive to current needs under the prevailing conditions is also the subject of intensive deliberations currently taking place in the DFG Senate.

3 The DFG's Range of Responsibilities

The DFG does not confine itself to funding individual research projects. As the central self-governing organisation for science and the humanities in Germany, it also considers itself responsible for ensuring and continuing to improve the conditions for research in Germany. In recent years, the DFG has expanded its range of responsibilities, reflecting both the changing requirements of the research system and also impetus from research policy and society.

Profile of Responsibilities

The survey findings show that applicants largely recognise this expanded profile of responsibilities, with a majority rating it as important or very important. Respondents attach the greatest importance to responsibilities that shape the fundamental conditions for research. These include, in particular, safeguarding good research practice and supporting researchers in early career phases, as well as international and national research cooperation. At the same time, a majority of respondents also consider responsibilities that address new research policy developments to be important, though these do not attract the virtually unanimous approval accorded to other areas of responsibility. This applies to areas such as participation in the Excellence Strategy, gender equality, diversity in research and sustainability.

The DFG's continually evolving range of responsibilities is also reflected in the proposal process. In recent years, for example, new proposal elements have been introduced concerning the relevance of sex, gender and diversity to the research context, and also reflections on the ecological sustainability of the proposed research project. A standardised CV format has also been introduced to provide a broader and more readily comparable basis for assessing individual career paths and research achievements. Applicants generally consider the additional work associated with these measures to be manageable. The survey findings provide no indication of any fundamental problems with their acceptance.

The DFG regards these findings as confirmation of its understanding of its responsibilities. It will continue to adapt its range of responsibilities to changing requirements while pursuing solutions appropriate to the research community that place research quality at the centre. In doing so, it remains committed to its core mission of funding excellent research and achieving lasting improvements in the conditions for research.



The DFG's Fulfilment of Its Responsibilities as Viewed by a Diverse Research Community

In several areas of the DFG's work, it is striking that a high proportion of respondents state that they are unable to assess how well these responsibilities are fulfilled. This is probably due in part to the fact that the survey addresses a highly heterogeneous group of applicants who have differing levels of exposure to the DFG's various responsibilities and activities beyond direct project funding.

Where respondents felt able to make an assessment, they generally rated the DFG's fulfilment of its responsibilities positively. At the same time, assessments of the DFG's performance vary depending on the area concerned, with some responsibilities being viewed more critically than others. Respondents identify a need for improvement comparatively frequently in the areas of policy advice, the promotion of diversity, support for universities of applied sciences and the further development of research assessment. A more detailed analysis of the free-text responses will be required to determine whether respondents are critical of the DFG's engagement in these areas in principle, whether particular approaches are viewed critically or whether respondents might even prefer the DFG to be more active. Applicants attach particular importance to support for early career researchers. It is therefore especially encouraging that the funding opportunities available for this purpose – such as the Walter Benjamin Programme and Research Training Groups – are generally regarded as attractive and appropriately resourced. The findings thus confirm the high priority that the DFG attaches to supporting early career researchers. It regards this area of activity as one of its central responsibilities and will continue to develop it in line with changing needs.

The applicant population reflects the diversity of researchers in Germany. For example, around one-fifth of applicants obtained their doctorate outside Germany, one-quarter were not born in Germany and 40 per cent are the first generation in their families to enter higher education.

As the self-governing organisation of the research community in Germany, the DFG seeks to promote academic excellence through open competition. This also involves taking account of the differing perspectives and circumstances within an increasingly diverse research community. A diverse applicant population helps ensure that the available research potential is harnessed as fully as possible and that research quality is enhanced. The DFG takes this into account in its funding activities and in fulfilling its responsibilities, with the aim of strengthening merit-based selection and academic excellence.

4 Competition in Research and Peer Review

Through its programmes and procedures, the DFG organises competition for limited funding based on academic excellence. A successful proposal therefore provides not only access to financial resources but also recognition from peers within a competitive research system. The survey findings underscore this special role of the DFG: for many applicants, the academic prestige associated with DFG funding is one of the most important reasons they have for submitting a proposal.

The competitive process is founded on the principle of peer review. Accordingly, the review and decision-making processes and the reviewers' perspective formed another focus of the present survey.

Review Process

The survey findings show that the fairness of the review processes is one of the most important reasons for submitting a proposal to the DFG. This confirms the fundamental trust placed in the science-driven peer review system. At the same time, however, the responses demonstrate that applicants frequently perceive the fairness and clarity of the actual process as falling short of their expectations. Only approximately half of respondents in each case believe that the reviews or the review and decision-making processes did justice to their proposal, and even fewer applicants agree that the written rationale is easy to follow. It should be borne in mind that the responses relate to both successful and unsuccessful proposals and that there are considerable differences between these two groups.

The DFG regards these findings as grounds for further reflection. The [survey conducted jointly with the IFQ in 2010](#) revealed widespread dissatisfaction with the reasons given for funding decisions (see Fig. 56 in that report). In response to the feedback received at that time, transparency was increased by providing the full review reports and the statements issued by review panels and decision-making bodies. Nevertheless, there has been no significant improvement in terms of the extent to which respondents find the reasoning justified. The findings demonstrate that transparency alone does not ensure acceptance of decisions. Providing comprehensible reasons for funding decisions therefore remains a key challenge for competitive funding systems – particularly in view of funding budgets stagnating in real terms, rising proposal numbers and declining success rates, which will result in more proposals being rejected in future. In a comparative evaluation, this applies particularly to proposals that received positive reviews but were ultimately found less convincing only when compared with other proposals.

Reviewers

In addition to focusing on respondents' experiences as applicants, the report also provides insights into the reviewers' perspective. Many people within the research system perform multiple roles: sometimes they submit proposals; at other times they review them. Some of the survey questions therefore addressed people with precisely this dual experience of the DFG.

Almost half of the applicants surveyed have themselves acted as reviewers for the DFG. At this level, the findings demonstrate a high degree of acceptance of the peer review process: more than 90 per cent of respondents regard reviewing as an obligation to the research community, and almost as many cite their academic interest in the project concerned as their most important reason for accepting a review request. The processes themselves are also viewed largely positively. 93 per cent of respondents who have participated in written reviews and 83 per cent of those with experience of review panels believe that these processes enable a sound assessment of research quality.

The findings underscore researchers' strong willingness to assume responsibility in the peer review process. At the same time, they show



that having sufficient time available remains the essential requirement for this engagement: lack of time is by far the most common reason for declining a review request.

Together with the finding that academic interest in the project concerned is the primary motivation for accepting a review request for a very large majority of reviewers, these results underscore how important it is for the DFG to select reviewers whose expertise is closely matched to the project. Respondents believe that the DFG is largely successful in achieving this. In this regard, the DFG draws on the expertise of its academically qualified staff, who organise the review and decision-making processes, maintain a close subject-specific dialogue with the research community and seek to ensure that reviewers' expertise is matched as closely as possible to the proposals concerned.

Overall, the findings highlight an inherent conflict within competitive funding systems: while applicants and reviewers broadly endorse peer review as a fundamental principle, they assess individual decisions considerably more critically. The DFG continues to regard peer review as the best available procedure for assessing research quality and selecting excellent research. In view of rising proposal numbers and declining success rates, it is becoming increasingly important for the DFG to make its procedures efficient, transparent and as streamlined as possible, to give appropriate recognition to the contributions of volunteer reviewers, and to continue developing peer review together with its statutory bodies and its national and international partners.

5 Areas for Action and Outlook

Overall, the survey findings show that, from the applicants' perspective, the DFG fulfils its mission in key areas. This applies particularly to the openness of its funding portfolio to all topics and its breadth, the quality of its funding instruments, the organisation of the review and decision-making processes, the creation of favourable conditions for research – not least for researchers in the early stages of their careers – and the services and advice provided by the Head Office.

The DFG derives three principal areas for action from the findings:

- **Strengthen Communication and Dialogue.** Both the DFG's range of responsibilities and its applicant population have become increasingly diverse in recent years. The DFG regards this as a mandate to further expand its dialogue with a diverse research community and give even greater consideration to differing perspectives and needs in its activities. Independently of this, the survey shows that the reasoning behind review and funding decisions could be made easier to follow. For this reason, the DFG will seek to make its procedures and decision-making processes even more transparent in future and communicate them even more clearly.
- **Strengthen and Further Develop Peer Review.** Rising proposal numbers and declining response rates to review requests are increasing the pressure on the review system. The DFG will therefore continue to develop its procedures in order to use the available resources efficiently and give appropriate consideration to the burden on those involved, while at the same time safeguarding

the high standards of research quality applied in project selection. The aim must be to ensure that in future, the effort involved in applying for funding remains reasonably proportionate to the prospects of success.

- **Further Develop the Funding Portfolio and the Conditions for Research.** The DFG will continue to align its funding portfolio with the research community's changing requirements. In doing so, it must maintain an appropriate balance between the breadth of the funding opportunities available and the distinctive profiles of the individual funding formats. The overarching objective remains to shape the conditions within the research system so as to enable excellent research.

These comments address only some of the survey findings. Nor has the potential of the survey been by any means exhausted by the [infas report](#). In particular, the numerous free-text responses provide a valuable basis for more detailed analyses that will inform the further development of the DFG's funding activities.

In addition to helping the DFG understand applicants' expectations and experiences, the present findings provide a starting point for further analysis and ongoing dialogue with the research community.

Find out more in the full report

How do researchers perceive the DFG, its funding opportunities and procedures – from deciding whether to submit a proposal through to carrying out funded projects? On behalf of the DFG, the infas Institute for Applied Social Science contacted 10,000 randomly selected applicants. Of these, 3,459 took part in the online survey.

The full report provides a comprehensive overview of the survey findings:

www.dfg.de/antragstellenden-befragung



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Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft e. V.

German Research Foundation

Kennedyallee 40 · 53175 Bonn, Germany

Postal address: 53170 Bonn, Germany

Tel.: +49 228 885-1

postmaster@dfg.de

www.dfg.de/en

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Responsible for content:

Department I International Affairs and Integrative Activities,

Department II Scientific Affairs,

Department III Coordinated Programmes and Infrastructure

Contact Persons at the DFG Head Office:

Dr. Ursula **Maur**, Informationsmanagement, ursula.maur@dfg.de

Anke **Reinhardt**, Informationsmanagement, anke.reinhardt@dfg.de

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