

Explorative Study of the Humboldt Network

Executive Summary

Since it was founded just over 60 years ago, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation has evolved a centrepiece that has become its unique feature – the Humboldt Network. Today, it embraces more than 26,000 Humboldtians of all disciplines in over 140 countries around the world as well as their hosts in Germany. The fellows' membership in the Network is for life – in keeping with the motto: “Once a Humboldtian – always a Humboldtian”.

In order to become actively involved in the Humboldt Network, Humboldtians have access to a variety of alumni sponsorship tools following their first Foundation-sponsored research stay. For example, they can receive financial support from the Foundation for a further research stay in Germany lasting up to three months, or they can apply for financial support to hold a conference known as a Humboldt Kolleg together with other Humboldtians in their own countries.

By maintaining, strengthening and expanding academic connections between fellows and their German colleagues as well as amongst Humboldtians around the globe, the Foundation nurtures its Humboldt Network with two main goals in mind: to help (1) internationalise the German academic and research landscape and (2), beyond academic cooperation, to contribute to German foreign cultural and educational policy.

But are Humboldtians taking advantage of these tools? How do they connect with each other and with researchers in Germany? What would they like to see improved?

This study examines the objectives of the Humboldt Foundation's networking activities by analysing and evaluating the Foundation's individual alumni sponsorship tools (see Chapter 5), as well as by conducting an explorative study to describe the structure of the Network (“mapping”, see Chapter 6). “Mapping” the Humboldt Network and its functionality is designed to reveal the members' networking habits and motivation as well as to shed light on the role of Alexander von Humboldt Foundation headquarters in this process.

Quantitative as well as qualitative methods were used to meet the diverse requirements of this study. Its core is a comprehensive online survey of various sub-groups in the Network. In addition, the study includes guided interviews with alumni, political representatives and Humboldt Foundation staff, as well as two group discussions with fellowship recipients. In addition, internal reports and records as well as the Humboldt Foundation database were analysed with regard to the use of alumni tools. The bulk of the data was collected during the first half of 2014; subsequently the data was analysed and the report written.

According to the results of the study, in the vast majority of cases, the utilisation of the various alumni tools fulfils the respective objectives (see Chapter 5). The analysis of the various alumni sponsorship tools, however, also shows that awareness of these tools, and hence their usage, varies greatly between regions. Alumni from developing and transition countries benefit to a much greater extent from alumni sponsorship tools than those from high-tech countries. Alumni from Africa, the Middle East and Asia also demonstrate closer personal bonds with the Foundation as well as a stronger connection with Germany. Moreover, alumni from these groups attest to a feeling of particularly strong “family ties” with the Humboldt Network. By comparison, this sense of belonging to the Network and connection with Germany is less prominent in researchers from high-tech countries, in particular from North America (see Chapter 6.2.2). According to the outcomes of this study, in these countries there is still potential for stronger ties to and greater involvement in the Network, which remains to be tapped.

These insights clearly indicate that the Humboldt Network is a network in the traditional sense: the funded scientists maintain stable and sustainable connections with Germany and the Foundation, as well as with other Humboldtians worldwide (see Chapter 6.1). Many consider their membership of the Humboldt Network and the opportunity to connect with other outstanding researchers as personally and academically enriching (see Chapter 6.2.3). Most Humboldtians feel a bond with Germany, the Foundation and the Humboldt Network that lasts well beyond their initial research stay (see Chapter 6.1.1). In addition to the academic and professional benefits, this connection also has a distinct emotional dimension. The personal experience of sustained individual support (“Once a Humboldtian, always a Humboldtian”) can generate a sense of personal appreciation that far outlasts the initial sponsorship period (see Chapter 6.1).

Beyond the personal benefit to the Humboldtians and their hosts, the global Humboldt Network also offers great science-policy benefits concerning the internationalization of Germany as research location. As the outcomes of this study demonstrate (see Chapter 6.1), it facilitates close and lasting contacts between top-level international researchers around the world and academia in Germany. It is not only the visiting scientists’ research stays and the ensuing connections and collaborations that greatly help to internationalise German science. In addition, Humboldtians who stay in Germany on a permanent basis introduce their own international network into their collaborations. Germans who conduct research abroad on the Humboldt Foundation’s Feodor Lynen Fellowships also return to Germany from their host country with new contacts. All in all, it can be assumed that the networking activities based on Humboldt Foundation sponsorship strengthen the competitiveness of German research and enhance its international visibility.

As expected, the insights gained from this explorative study prove that not all Humboldt alumni exhibit the same level of activity in the Network. Nevertheless the majority of them

are approachable and willing to be called upon to act both for the Humboldt Foundation and for German international cultural and educational policy. This includes, in particular, communicating a realistic image of Germany and its science and research landscape. In addition, some alumni actively serve as contacts and a sounding board for German policy and science (see Chapter 6). Humboldtians also help recruit junior researchers for a research stay in Germany. Their profound knowledge of the German research landscape and German culture, politics and society, as well as the experience of having received individual sponsorship in their own careers and personal advancement from a publicly-funded German foundation makes most Humboldtians important partners and advocates for German foreign cultural and educational policy (see Chapter 6.3).

Altogether, the results of the study lead to the conclusion that the use of alumni sponsorship tools achieves both key objectives of fostering and extending the Humboldt Network.

Core Results and Recommendations

The following summarises the core results of the study as well as the resulting recommendations:

1. Alumni Tools

The Humboldt Network includes researchers of various age groups and from different academic and cultural backgrounds. The Alexander von Humboldt Foundation addresses the diverse needs of these groups by offering a wide range of alumni sponsorship activities. The results of the study demonstrate that this strategy is effective: survey respondents rated the respective tools as positive and beneficial to their own careers.

The information collected in the scope of the study further proves that the various alumni sponsorship activities are used effectively for maintaining and developing contacts within the Humboldt Network and thus contribute to internationalising Germany as a research location.

Room for improvement does seem to emerge when the positive rating achieved by the existing alumni tools is set against the low awareness or limited usage of them in some parts of the network. Future strategic considerations about expanding and developing the portfolio could set new targeted priorities – always taking account of the financial leeway available within the Foundation budget.

Recommendations:

Alumni tools in general:

Looking at the dimensions “Awareness”, “Usage” and “Rating” of alumni tools, there are noticeable differences between both the various programme groups and the alumni’s countries of origin and academic fields. Also, at several points in the study it is revealed that information gaps of varying degrees exist with regard to the alumni sponsorship activities that are available. Broader, more consistent marketing efforts would be desirable to enhance awareness amongst the members of the Network and render the use of tools more calculable for alumni in general.

The results also show that apparently, a large proportion of collaborations within the Network are funded by third parties, without direct support from the Humboldt Foundation. Nevertheless, the Foundation’s alumni tools are of vital importance to academic cooperation, in particular in countries that offer few funding alternatives. Accordingly, alumni from Africa and Asia generally rate the importance of alumni sponsorship activities and the Network for their personal academic careers much higher than North American or European alumni.

For fostering its Network, the Humboldt Foundation must strive to offer Humboldtians and hosts an appealing, sustainable network with interesting collaborative partners for all members. Therefore, alumni who cooperate with hosts in Germany or with one another

using third-party funds should remain visible in the Humboldt Network and available as contacts for activities. This will require increased efforts to involve alumni from academic fields and regions – in particular high-tech countries – who have demonstrated less activity in the past in networking activities (e.g. by expanding the alumni tool “Research Group Linkages”).

The Foundation offers both alumni tools for largely individualised sponsorship (e.g. printing subsidies, book donations) as well as tools that are mainly designed to strengthen the Network in specific regions or in general (e.g. Kollegs, Colloquia). In order to continue using the funds available in the best interests of the Foundation, individual tools should undergo a cost-benefit analysis to establish their usefulness. This also begs the question as to whether proactive, strategic tools that reach a large number of Humboldtians (e.g. Kollegs, Colloquia) ought to be given priority over more reactive tools that tend to benefit individuals (e.g. printing subsidies, book donations).

Specific alumni tools:

- The majority of alumni are very satisfied with the tool, *Renewed Research Stays in Germany*. Those alumni abroad who did voice criticism expressed the wish to extend the duration of a renewed stay in Germany to up to six months. They also felt it should be possible to apply for it sooner than three years after completing the initial fellowship period. To maintain or even increase the appeal of the tool in the future, headquarters should consider whether such modifications would make sense.
- About half of the *hosts in Germany* know that it is possible to receive financial support from the Foundation for a return visit to their alumni abroad. The Foundation should continue to publicise and expand this tool in order to involve hosts more in Network activities and enlist their support for marketing purposes. The results of the study also suggest that many hosts feel a strong bond with the Foundation and are willing to get involved.
- The survey showed that a third of Feodor Lynen alumni are not aware of the Foundation’s alumni sponsorship tools. The Foundation should assess whether the portfolio of tools for this group could be redesigned to better meet the needs of Lynen alumni and involve them more in the Network than has previously been the case. Moreover, Lynen alumni rarely take advantage of the opportunity to undertake a further research stay with Humboldtians abroad. One of the objectives of this tool is to foster connections between German researchers and partners in transition and developing countries. So far, only a small number of Lynen fellows has completed a stay in countries in this category; even fewer of them used alumni sponsorship for a renewed stay with their respective host. The Foundation should, therefore, consider measures to enhance the appeal of a stay with Humboldtians in transition and developing countries for Lynen alumni. It would make sense to develop the tool of Renewed Research Stays for this purpose.

- The results of the study show that alumni sponsorship meets its objectives with regard to *Research Group Linkages*. Research Group Linkages are a particularly effective tool for recruiting young researchers for the Humboldt Network. Currently, the programme is only open to alumni from nations with weak currencies. In order to create additional opportunities for scientific exchange and involve more groups in the Network, the programme could be expanded to include alumni from other countries. By supporting linkages between institutes in Germany and institutes in high-tech countries it might be possible to increase the access to the potential of these regions for the Network.
- The results of the study prove that the *Humboldt Alumni Award* works well and should be continued in the same manner.
- From the survey participants' perspective, *Humboldt Kollegs* are an excellent networking tool that promotes regional exchange and facilitates the involvement of junior researchers. The respondents' only criticism concerns the selection of topics, which is sometimes considered too broad. The programme's sponsorship guidelines do, however, allow for more specific topic areas. It should, therefore, be communicated more clearly that Kollegs do not have to be interdisciplinary. In addition, the Foundation's objective of regional networking, which is just as important as academic exchange, should be made clearer to those participating in this type of event.
- The results of the study suggest that *Humboldt Colloquia* intensify the bonds between the alumni who participate in a given region as well as their connection with the Foundation. Foundation headquarters should, therefore, definitely retain Humboldt Colloquia as a strategic tool to continue the targeted expansion and maintenance of the Humboldt Network possibly by focusing on specific regions.
- Many alumni who participated in the survey expressed their desire for better access to electronic knowledge bases such as journals, databases etc. The Foundation should consider re-allocating resources from *book donations and print subsidies* to electronic media, or supplementing them with electronic media. In this context, the Foundation could also examine the possibility of granting every Humboldtian access to digital archives as soon as they become members of the Humboldt Network. Such exclusive access would add yet greater value to membership of the Network.
- Alumni consider *equipment subsidies* an important factor that supports the continuity of their research activities. In particular, they help alumni from transition and developing countries to remain on a par with their international academic communities and should therefore continue to be available to this group.

Need for new alumni tools:

The results of the study suggest that there is a two-fold need for additional alumni tools: Firstly, there should be further initiatives to support and expand academic networking amongst the alumni themselves. Secondly, to maintain the excellence of the Network, tools are needed to enhance the appeal and usefulness of membership, in particular for

alumni from high-tech countries. In addition to expanding Research Group Linkages, this could be achieved by organising events that specifically cater for the interests and needs of Humboldtians from these countries (high-level events).

2. Bonding with the Humboldt Network at an early stage

In general, the connection with Germany as well as involvement in the Network is significantly stronger amongst alumni who have already participated in one of the Foundation's networking events. Taking part in these events as well as in the study trip organised by the Foundation and the personal contacts with Foundation staff that ensue seem to form the basis for later involvement in the Humboldt Network and a bond with Germany. Alumni whose stay in Germany ended less than three years previously felt a particularly close bond with the Foundation.

Recommendations:

The response rates to the online survey can be seen as an indicator of Humboldtians' bond with Germany and the Foundation. The response rate was particularly high amongst alumni whose initial stay ended less than three years previously, but it dropped significantly as the interval since the stay in Germany increased. This shows that the bond is strongest immediately following the first research stay sponsored by the Foundation.

Moreover, there is a positive correlation between participation in networking events organised by the Foundation and later involvement in the Network. This leads to the conclusion that events are a way – perhaps the way – of making fellows identify with Germany and the Foundation during their initial research stay, and thus recruiting them for the Network on a sustainable basis. The Foundation should also reach out to sponsorship-holders who have not participated in these events after their research stay in order to retain them for the Network. Due to their strong bonds with Germany and the Foundation during the first three years after completing their initial research stay, it seems advisable to systematically reach out to alumni during this period.

3. Lynen Alumni / German Network

The outcomes of the study confirm insights that had already been gained from the evaluation of the Lynen Programme: overall, Lynen alumni have a weaker emotional bond with the Humboldt Network and are less committed to Foundation purposes. They also use alumni sponsorship tools to a significantly lesser extent. The evaluation of the Lynen Programme as well as the online survey in this study show that, whilst cooperation with the Humboldt host does continue after completing the research stay abroad, it is generally less sustainable than cooperation with other researchers in the host country¹. In addition, approximately one fifth

¹ Compare section 6.1.2 as well as section 8.2.4 in the final evaluation report on the Feodor Lynen Programme. This report draws the conclusion that "Lynen fellows prioritise internationalisation over integration into the Humboldt Network [...]" (ibid, p. 101)

of Lynen alumni no longer work at a university or publicly-funded research institution today. Thus it is clear that this group has a very different kind of bond with the Network and the Foundation.

And yet despite this, due to their successful careers², their affinity with international academic cooperation and not least the fact that they represent a younger generation of researchers in the Network, Lynen alumni should be seen as a group that can play a central role in maintaining and expanding the Humboldt Network.

Furthermore, the German Network also comprises the group of Humboldt fellows' hosts. Some of the insights gained from this study suggest that a number of these researchers feel a close bond with the Foundation and might be willing to get more involved in the Network.

Recommendations:

The Foundation should explore whether and to what extent the group of Lynen alumni could be involved more in Network activities. Due to their special connection with the Foundation, this group should be analysed separately in order to better assess their needs with regard to alumni sponsorship and to collect more information about their motivation for international networking.

According to the outcomes of the online survey, Lynen alumni are interested in more exchange within the Network, but apparently there is no appropriate platform for such exchange. The Foundation's own online social network, Humboldt Life, could serve this purpose in the future. In addition, the Foundation could consider facilitating additional alumni meetings, either in the context of Foundation events or in cooperation with the "German Association of Humboldtians" (DGH).

The results of the study suggest that a number of hosts would like to get more involved in the Network. It should, therefore, be considered whether this potential could be tapped, for example by inviting hosts to the Foundation's networking events more often.

Since 2012, personnel budget constraints at headquarters have forced the Foundation to significantly reduce its activities for the Network in Germany. From a strategic point of view and based on the outcomes of the study as described above, this step should be reconsidered since the value of the German Network is very substantial for the entire Humboldt Network. One point to consider in this context is that despite the fact that alumni sponsorship is not particularly cost-intensive, it requires a large amount of human resources (high levels of personnel in relation to the funding required).

² See the evaluation results of the Feodor Lynen Research Fellowship Programme.

4. Ambassador Scientists

Much of the information that was collected, in particular from the document analysis and individual interviews, clearly indicates that Ambassador Scientists abroad are a highly motivated and vital group for the Network.

Recommendations:

Ambassador Scientists abroad perform vital tasks on behalf of the Foundation locally, which means they are in a position to assume a central role in maintaining and expanding the Humboldt Network. The study shows that these particularly committed alumni are still somewhat uncertain as to what their role really is. The Foundation could do more to manage expectations, for example by communicating more specific information (such as the option of having travel expenses reimbursed), by providing more information material, by showcasing best practices on the website, or by reviewing and potentially rewriting the “job description”. There are also clues to suggest that Ambassador Scientists would like to network more. For example, many participants rated the gathering first held at the Foundation’s Annual Meeting in 2013 as very beneficial. Humboldt Life has also been offered to Ambassador Scientists and could play an important role as a future networking and exchange tool.

5. Access to information about individuals in the Network

At various points in the study, alumni and hosts express the desire to find each other more easily in the Network and to make contacts with other Humboldtians via online searches.

Recommendations:

Alumni and their hosts suggest improving access to information about Network members and creating ways of searching for other Humboldtians using certain criteria (e.g. Who is currently in Germany? Where are Humboldtians in my country?). It seems that members are either not sufficiently aware of the “Searching the Network” option on the Foundation website, or it does not fully meet their needs for a quick, comprehensive search. Alumni abroad as well as hosts and Lynen alumni in Germany greatly welcome the recently added option for exchange and networking via a social media tool (Humboldt Life). At the beginning of 2015, however, the development of Humboldt Life had to be put on hold for financial reasons. This measure should be reconsidered as soon as possible in order to expand this networking tool and make it appealing for the long term.

6. Promoting Young Talent

Throughout the online survey as well as in the guided interviews Humboldt alumni stress the great importance of promoting young talent. Humboldt alumni help recruit new, excellent researchers for the Humboldt Network in many different ways, in particular by introducing the Foundation’s programmes to young researchers directly or by helping them apply for

fellowships. The Foundation should continue to support and promote this commitment, since early contact with young researchers is key for the continuous renewal and expansion of the Humboldt Network.

Recommendations:

The results of the study illustrate how strongly alumni feel about involving young researchers and how committed they are to bringing young researchers into the Network. The Foundation should continuously evaluate whether existing alumni tools fully exploit opportunities to open the Network to new generations. One possibility to push this opening could be seen in creating better opportunities for Humboldt alumni to recruit young researchers for Humboldt sponsorship independently.