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SUPPORTING RESEARCHERS UNDER THREAT IN TODAY'S ACADEMIA

LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE EVALUATION OF THE PHILIPP SCHWARTZ INITIATIVE

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SHORT SUMMERY

The Philipp Schwartz Initiative (PSI) is a relatively new program of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (AvH) that was launched in 2016 in close cooperation with the Federal Foreign Office. PSI enables universities and other research institutions in Germany to host foreign scientists who are exiled, displaced, and threatened by war and persecution in their own countries. As Philipp Schwartz fellows they are entitled to continue their research for a period of two years.

Technopolis Austria was tasked with an evaluation of the first four selection rounds of PSI. The evaluation aimed at taking stock of program implementation, collecting interim results, assessing goal attainment and to provide recommendations to further improve the program. The program aimed at developing structures within organisations hosting threatened researchers, at integrating fellows into research to increase career perspectives, as well as at raising awareness and at sharing information and facilitate networking within German Academia. To our knowledge, this was the first evaluation of a comparable initiative.

Our contribution answers the following questions: First, how to best cater for the specific features of the program and the program beneficiaries in the design of the evaluation methodology? Second, what kind of methodological challenges did we encounter and what mitigation strategies were implemented? Third, what were success factors that enabled the program to reach its goals and what were barriers? And fourth, on a more general level, how is a program like PSI positioned within the AvH, German Academia and how can it contribute to safeguarding academic freedom?

To answer the evaluation questions, an evaluation concept combining qualitative and quantitative elements was developed and discussed with the AvH. There were several specific methodological challenges to overcome (building trust in the field of beneficiaries, privacy, data protection). The evaluation shows that the program objectives have been achieved to a large degree. We identified several success factors of the program such as program design, designated project structure, quick and flexible program administration, following a sensible division of tasks among stakeholders and lastly, community building and engagement. Barriers identified were personal difficulties (e.g., migration, threat, administration of e.g., refugee status, family, language, psychological distress). On a project level, mentors had to invest a high degree of personal time and commitment with comparable less support. On institutional level, psychological support was difficult to offer. Most important areas for improvement were defining better the role of mentors and increasing their support and/or exchange, funding the fellows through contracts (not stipends), and minor changes in monitoring.

PSI positions itself in an environment of on the one hand longstanding initiatives by NGOs and, on the other hand, various programs launched recently by research funding organizations such as the AvH. Implementing the program changed the AvH as well and provided an impulse to reflect on the German academic system, but PSI is also a contribution towards providing R&I resilience since it allows fellows to continue their research.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND THE PHILIPP SCHWARTZ INITIATIVE

With recent geopolitical developments, (re)emerging crises and a surge of authoritarian tendencies even in democratic countries such as the USA, Hungary or Poland the topic of academic freedom has been brought on the agenda. In a recently published study, Kinzelbach et al (2021) show how Academic Freedom is decreasing in countries such as Poland or even the USA, while being already critically low in countries such as China or Turkey.

This is, however, not the first time that relations between state, researchers and academia are changing: During the Age of Enlightenment, scholars sought to delimit themselves from state and church and claimed "libertas philosophandi", or the right to philosophize (Hoye, W.J. 2009). In the middle of the 19th century, liberal students demanded freedom of teaching and learning, resulting e.g. in the Austrian-Hungarian Staatsgrundgesetz of 1867 postulating the freedom of science and its teaching: "Die Wissenschaft und ihre Lehre ist frei." And lastly, in the years of the National Socialist regime, academic freedom was severely limited with, among others, researchers being expelled or even murdered, fields of research restricted and the institutional autonomy of universities reduced.

Therefore, Academic Freedom is typically defined comprising an individual and an institutional dimension. Vrielink et al. (2011) formulate:

- "Far-reaching individual rights to expressive freedoms for members of the academic community (both staff and students)

mainly as free enquirers, including the freedom to study, the freedom to teach, the freedom of research and information, the freedom of expression and publication (including the 'right to err'), and the right to undertake professional activities outside of academic employment;

- Collective or institutional autonomy for the academy in general and/or subsections thereof (faculties, research units, etc.). Said autonomy implies that departments, faculties and universities as a whole have the right (and obligation) to preserve and promote the principles of academic freedom in the conduct of their internal and external affairs."

With the Philipp Schwartz Initiative (PSI), the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (AvH) combines individual and institutional aspects of Academic freedom. PSI is a relatively new program that was launched in 2016 in close cooperation with the German Federal Foreign Office.[1] PSI enables universities and other research institutions in Germany to host foreign scientists who are exiled, displaced, and threatened by war and persecution in their own countries. As Philipp Schwartz fellows they are entitled to continue their research for a period of two years. The period can be prolonged once for another year, if necessary.

Interested host institutions can apply and present the AvH with suitable fellows as well as a Mentor who supports the scientific integration at the institution. They also need to present proof that the fellow is under threat, e.g. through an assessment carried out by a specialised organisation.[2]

Hosting institutions receive funding to award Philipp Schwartz fellowships and to establish structures that support the integration of the threatened researchers into the host institution. Moreover, the AvH fosters awareness raising activities and networking through accompanying events.

Working with threatened researchers is new for the AvH as well as for most German science organisations. In contrast to other AvH programs, PSI does not focus on scientific excellence, but on supporting foreign researchers under threat.

To our knowledge, this was the first evaluation of such an initiative. The program aimed at developing structures within organisations hosting threatened researchers, integrating fellows into research to increase career perspectives, as well as raising awareness and sharing information and facilitating networking within German Academia (see figure 1):

Figure 1: Logic Chart of PSI
Source: AvH, Technopolis

Context		Program Goals	Activities	Output	Outcome	Impacts
• German Foreign Office as co-organizer • Partnerorganisations like SAR, SRF, CARA • High Stakeholder/ Media Awareness • High Awareness witin the AvH • Private Foundations as funder • Shifting Threat Levels in regard to Academic Freedom	Institutions	• **(1) Establish structures** to facilitate the admission of researchers at risk to German science institutions	• **Funding** for science facility to build structure	• Social, administrative-legal and science-related **structures**	• **Contact points** for members of institutions. • **Use** of the structures • **Capacity building** in the institutions • **Awareness raising** in the institutions	• **Sustainable** structure and culture to support vulnerable researchers in the German science system.
	People	• **Temporary integration** of fellows into the research organisations to create career prospects	• **Selection** of grantees based on individual and institutional fit. • **Subsidies** for employment	• Temporary **admission** of researchers at risk to scientific institutions	• **Successful** integration into the host institute from the perspective of the grantees and the institutions	• **Institutional learning** in the institution • Promising **prospects** for a new professional start for the Fellows
	Academic Community	• **Raising of awareness** in the German science system for the situation of endangered researchers	• Implementation of **activities** on the subject area in Germany	• Opportunities for **exchange** and **networking** between stakeholders	• **Visibility of the topic** in the German science system • **Stabilization of awareness** on the worldwide endangerment of academic freedoms • **Role model** for other institutions	• **Visible and profound awareness** on academic freedoms as a component of the German Foreign Office's activities
		• **Leading role for AvH** in building a platform for information exchange and maintaining the network of German institutions	• **Events** with German science organizations and with international Partner organizations • **Foundation** of the German section of SAR	• National **contacts** and **exchange** • **Access** to internationally experienced players • **SAR DE activities**	• **Networking of institutions** in Germany on the topic • **Embedding** in the worldwide context • Further **training** of persons in this area • **Anchoring** of the topic	• **Long-term national networking structure** involving international organizations and led by AvH.

1 https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/bewerben/foerderprogram/philipp-schwartz-initiative
2 E.g. Scholars at Risk (SAR) or the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA).

Technopolis Austria was tasked with an evaluation (Dudenbostel & Warta 2020)[3] of the first four selection rounds of PSI. The evaluation took stock of program implementation, collected interim results, assessed goal attainment and provided recommendations to further improve the program. In addition, the evaluation process also included an analysis of the fellows in terms of socio-demographic, legal and social characteristics, gather initial experiences from the beneficiaries and provide a systematic comparison of PSI to other relevant funding initiatives and programs.

This contribution, based on experiences made during the project, focusses on what is important when evaluating a programme for researchers under threat and thus, on the following questions:

- First, how to best cater for the specific features of the program and the program beneficiaries in the design of the evaluation methodology?
- Second, what kind of methodological challenges did we encounter and what mitigation strategies were implemented?
- Third, what were specific success factors that enabled the program to reach its goals and what were barriers?
- And fourth, on a more general level, how is a program like PSI positioned within the AvH, German Academia and within the discourse on academic freedom?

METHODOLOGY DESIGN AND CHALLENGES

The evaluation was guided by the question "what works, for whom, and under which circumstances?" The "Who's" that interested us were the researchers under threat on the one hand and the hosting institutions on the other hand. Within the first four selection round, PSI supported 162 fellows of which about 58% were from Turkey and another 30% from Syria. These were hosted by 48 German universities, 16 research institutes and nine Universities of Applied Sciences.

Due to the fact that this was the first evaluation and also one of the first studies in this specific context of researchers under threat, we needed to ensure that we developed a sound understanding of the researchers under threat and their specific contexts and backgrounds early on in the project. To that end, we strengthened the qualitative approach especially in the inception phase of the evaluation by organising focus groups with PSI fellows. Additionally, the evaluation team participated in the "Forum for Academic Freedom", an event organized by the Alliance of Science Organizations under the leadership of the AvH, to increase their knowledge of host institutions and important stakeholders as well as on the challenges, matters and impressions they already shared on the event. Alongside the focus groups, we conducted interviews with stakeholders, fellows, and mentors as well as with representatives of host institutions, some of which were developed into small case studies highlighting various aspects of program support. Interviews with fellows, mentors and representatives of host institutions were conducted face to face and on site. The collected qualitative evidence was further substantiated with a standardized only survey of the same target group. A media analysis of program communication as well as a comparison with other, national, and international programs concluded the methodological work.

A specificity of the program is the target group of researchers under threat. In praxis, PSI fellows had to leave their home country for several reasons, the most frequent one being that they were limited in their research due to their political views (n=66). Other, less frequent reasons were the destruction of infrastructure or equipment (n=29), their religion, ethnicity or sexual orientation (n=23) or their research topics (n=22).[4] However, for a number of fellows in particular from Turkey, political tensions were also present after arriving in Germany, for a few fellows even within the PSI community (see table 1):

Table 1: Political Tensions affecting PSI fellows

	Syria		Turkey		Other		Total	
	n	in %	n	in %	n	in %	n	in %
Yes…	14	40%	41	79%	4	31%	59	59%
...amongst people from my home country	11	31%	34	65%	3	23%	48	48%
...amongst PSI fellows		0%	4	8%		0%	7	7%
...the tensions are independent from place of origin	3	9%	3	6%	1	8%	4	4%
No	16	46%	5	10%	7	54%	28	28%
Not applicable	5	14%	6	12%	2	15%	13	13%
Total	35	100%	52	100%	13	100%	100	100%

Source: Survey amongst PSI fellows (n=100) Question: In your experience, are the political tensions that you know from your home country (if applicable) tangible in Germany as well? Single choice.

3 Dudenbostel, T.; Warta, K.: Evaluation der Philipp Schwartz-Initiative der Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung. Endbericht (2020). Siehe: https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/fileadmin/Entdecken/Zahlen_und_Statistiken/Evaluation_der_Philipp_Schwartz-Initiative/ergebnisse_evaluation_psi_lang.pdf

4 Survey amongst PSI Fellows (n=101). Multiple answers possible.

Due to the nature of working with fellows under threat, i.e., people who find themselves in personal danger, specific challenges emerged. First, there was the question whether fellows would participate in our research at all. Second, if they would participate, how open could the evaluation team expect them to be? And third, when working with personal data, how to secure the data shared with us and how to make sure that information reported can be anonymized effectively?

Regarding participation in our research, feedback to our focus groups suggested that indeed, some fellows did not participate at all or did not feel safe sharing experiences or opinions in the group. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the evaluation team, the discussions that took place were informative and useful. To increase the participation of fellows in further research steps, in the end, trust was the most important factor. To increase the fellows' trust in our work, once more the qualitative and thus personal contact with them during the focus groups and field visits turned out to be crucial; jointly with the high reputation of the AvH among fellows. Additionally, mentors and institutions were important intermediaries for us. Apart from the feedback received to the focus groups, interviews and the anonymized online survey yielded the expected results.

While anonymization of data and data protection are important and guaranteed in all our projects, seldom are the stakes so high. That meant that for this project, data protection methods were further intensified by opting to priority data security over data protection: e.g., by minimizing the number of copies of the same data stored, by extremely limiting (internal) data availability, storing sensitive data only locally and by adding password protection on several layers. In terms of anonymization of case vignettes, which had an illustrative and explanatory function, we opted to proceed in the following way: first, fellows were asked for their consent to participate, the case vignettes focused only on very specific parts of their experience and its relevant context (while not providing much other information on the fellows behind the stories) and lastly, the information that was provided was mixed up between the cases.

RESULTS: PROGRAM BARRIERS AND SUCCESS FACTORS

The evaluation shows that the objectives have been achieved to a large degree. We argue that the following aspects identified in our evaluation constituted success factors of the program:

First and most importantly on an individual level, the PSI support enabled researchers under threat to focus again on their research in a safe environment. For that, the program funding and support was essential. Second, by design, the program asks host institutions to name Mentors that are responsible for the scientific integration of fellows into the host institution (although in practice, Mentors often do much more). Against the backdrop of the various difficulties the fellows have encountered prior to the fellowship and within, the distribution of labor within the projects between fellow, mentor and host institution was important for the project success. Third, in the context of providing support to persons under threat, quick and flexible program administration is crucial, both in setting up projects and in administrating ongoing projects. Our evaluation showed that PSI performed much better in this regard then other research funding schemes. Fourth, the program was designed following a sensible division of tasks. Most importantly, it was a good choice of the AvH to have NGOs like the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA) assess whether applicants are under threat and thus eligible for funding. CARA and other NGOs have decades of experience in this regard. A fifth success factor was the readiness of the AvH to engage in relevant communities and networks early on (like Scholars at Risk (SAR)) and in community building where networks were not yet existent (as e.g., in most of the German Academia at the time of the program launch).

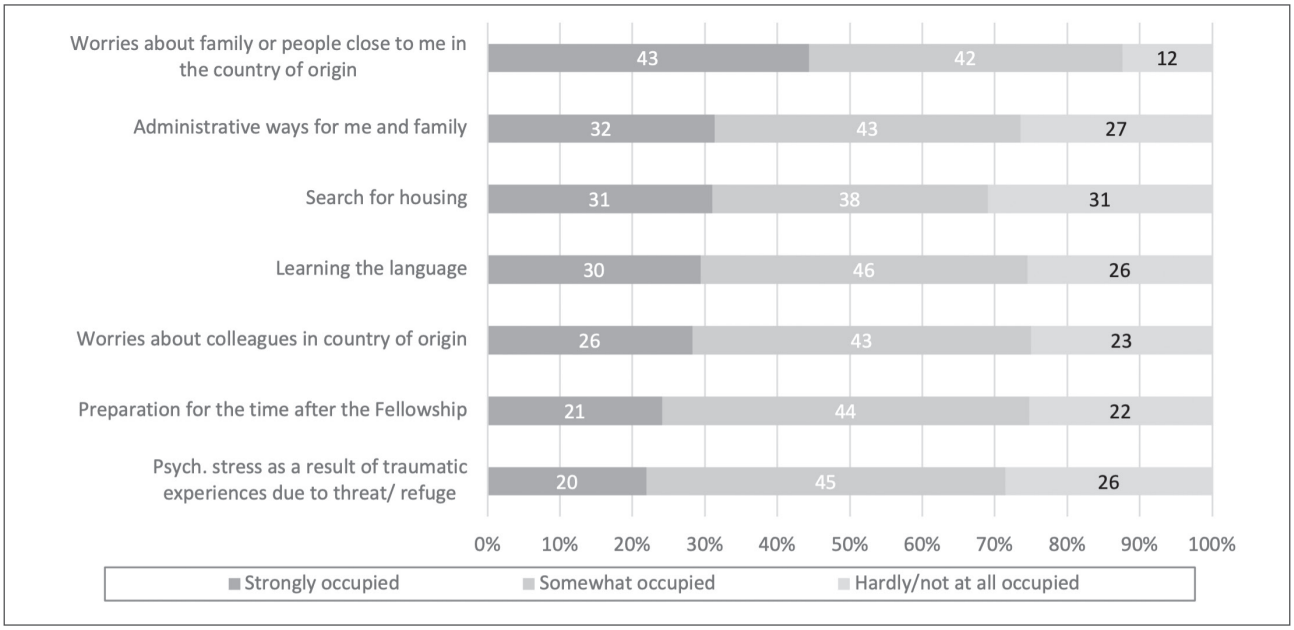
Nevertheless, a program supporting researchers under threat intervenes in a complex environment, and, in comparison to classic R&I funding schemes, in an environment with many more difficulties on a personal level. Barriers identified in our evaluation were: First, PSI intervenes in an incredibly difficult situation: researchers under threat are not mobile by choice but are forced to migrate – and that makes a difference! Often, they do not have advanced skills in the language of their new host country (72% overall, for researchers from Syria 42%), they often bring a family with at least one child (75%), in some cases the relocation itself was dangerous (about 25%) or at least arduous, and fellows and family reported being under psychological distress.[5]

In Germany, fellows are then introduced – often with little time to recover – to a highly competitive academic system where peers were supportive, but also competitors.[6] At the same time, fellows are occupied with organizing their stay administratively (e.g., apply for a refugee status), with finding residences, and organizing childcare or education for their families, etc. (see figure 2). Not all of these challenges are specific for researchers under threat when compared to what international researchers usually encounter – but for researchers under threat, they all come together at once.

5 Survey amongst PSI Fellows (n=101).

6 Fellows reported that in comparison to their home institutions, the scientific level at the host institutions was higher (more than 70%).

Figure 2: fellow's Occupation by selected Items



Source: Survey amongst PSI fellows (n=88) Question: How far were you occupied by other tasks or problems that distracted you from your research or that took time? Single Choice,

Second, as outlined above, a success factor on the project level are the Mentors of the fellows. However, mentors were often PIs or Professors and thus already very occupied with managing day to day teaching and research. They were mostly motivated to participate in PSI because they wanted to help a researcher at risk (more than 85% agreed strongly).[7] To fulfill their role in the projects, Mentors had to invest a high degree of personal time and commitment. Nevertheless, about 90% of the Mentors answered that they would consider being a Mentor again in the future. That is why, third, it was a challenge both for the mentors and for the fellows to be able to allow for sufficient self-care as well. And fourth, while being scarce in general, psychological support for refugees was often lacking or at least not well known on an institutional level. In fact, a high share of fellows reported that they need firstly more information events on German residence law (more than 40%) and secondly, offers of psychological support in situations of stress (about 38%).

Based on the evidence collected in our evaluation, we identified several areas for potential improvements. The most important are: First, the role and tasks of mentors should be defined better, accompanied by an increased exchange of experience among current and potential mentors. Since several comparable programs have mentors, the AvH should act as a platform for this activity. Second, the way the fellowships are funded should be better adapted to the needs of the fellows. In line with other programs of the AvH, PSI used stipends to channel funding to the individual fellows. While stipends provide flexibility as they only concern the foundation and the fellows directly, in many cases, fellows perceived them as hindering their integration at their host institution, as most of the other researchers had direct contracts with the host institution. Adding to the feeling of "not belonging as much to the host institution", stipends also added to the administrative burden of the fellows as they had to organize e.g. their social security independently. Third, the lump sum that supports the host institutions – intended to help host institutions to develop and/or provide support structures for researchers under threat overall – was identified as an important mechanism to facilitate integration and for community building at and beyond institutions. The way the lump sums are used should therefore be monitored. Lastly, the involvement of stakeholders from industry should be strengthened to help fellows increase career prospects outside of academia.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

During our evaluation, it quickly became obvious that PSI or similar programs were at the time novel for the AvH, Germany and continental Europe. However, several comparable programs were launched at the same time on an institutional or regional level in Germany, but also in France and, to some degree, within EU-programs. The positioning took place against the backdrop of the increased refugee occurrence in 2015, but many see themselves in a wider historical context of fostering academic freedom on an individual level. The two existing NGO support schemes stem from the 1930ies, when individual academic freedom was under threat on a larger scale in Germany and Austria and when standard works of sociology or philosophy of science were authored, e.g., Robert K. Merton's essay on The Normative Structure of Science (1942).

As the evaluation team participated in several events, it became also evident that there was a high level of (also personal) commitment within the emerging community of institutions and persons engaging with the

7 Survey amongst PSI Mentors (n=71).

topic. The program focused on helping foreign researchers under threat by enabling institutions to host them. Other objectives, especially the development of structures at the host institutions were also considered important, but less central to program beneficiaries and therefore, did not receive the same attention at all institutions. Furthermore – in an area of great difficulty and at a moment of great potential for distraction – PSI directs the fellows' attention to the time after the fellowship.

We argue, however, that implementing the program changed the AvH as well and provided an impulse to reflect on the German academic system. Engaging with researchers under threat means taking a different perspective on what public funding in an academic context should achieve: PSI is not about funding excellent science, but about supporting researchers under threat to conduct their research in safety and to provide a perspective towards career possibilities, possibly beyond academia. Therefore, PSI differs from other research funding schemes overall and in the AvH portfolio. In many discussions with policy makers, stakeholders, and researchers on the topic, it was also argued that this perspective is underdeveloped within German academia overall which is highly geared towards enabling excellent research through competition, but might neglect negative effects on the individual researchers competing.[8]

PSI can also be seen as a program safeguarding individual academic freedom on a global level, since many of the fellows fled their home countries because their research or research topics were seen as adversarial by those in power. Other researchers fled war or destruction. In both cases, PSI can allow for the continuation of research trajectories, although there is evidence that some researchers change their research topics, e.g. following their personal experiences with flight, migration, and oppression. Overall and in the long run, more than 80% of PSI fellows would like to continue their research and stay in academia.

This is one of the parallels of current fellows with the name giver of the program, Philipp Schwartz. Schwartz was a professor of pathology in Frankfurt and had to flee Germany in 1933 due to the Nazi terror. In Switzerland, he founded the "Notgemeinschaft deutscher Wissenschaftler im Ausland", a support organization for German refugee scientists. For many of those and including Philipp Schwartz himself, the organization found a new place of residence to work in safety, in a country that was, back then, rapidly modernizing its research and higher education system: The Republic of Turkey (Kreft 2015). There, Philipp Schwartz also shifted his research focus towards social medicinal topics. That was decades ago, though. Today, as indicated above, 60% of the researchers under threat supported by PSI until August 2018 stemmed from Turkey.

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8 See for example the current discussions on the German Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz under the hashtag #IAmHanna.