

Guidelines of the Max Weber Foundation on Academic Freedom

The Max Weber Foundation (Max Weber Stiftung, MWS) is one of the leading agencies supporting German research in the humanities and social sciences abroad. Around the world, it supports eleven scientifically autonomous institutes, which provide a bridge function between the host nations and Germany and play an important role in the international science scene. Being a multi-polar network covering many countries, the institutes promote the internationalisation of science beyond national borders.

Academic freedom in an international context

Research and science as well as their financing by public and private funds have experienced an extraordinarily dynamic development in the last two decades. They go hand in hand with the "Knowledge Race" already proclaimed years ago, which replaced outdated ideas of a global knowledge-based society shaped by only a few states.

In Germany, in the European Union and beyond, freedom to research enjoys special protection guaranteed by the Basic Law (Grundgesetz) and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. All other countries participating in global scientific competition also generally commit to the protection of academic and research freedom. Nevertheless, the universal value of research freedom is partly subject to greatly diverging basic frameworks, which are also referred to by the Academic Freedom Index developed by researchers at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, the University of Göteborg and the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI) together with the Scholars at Risk Network. This is also true of many sites of the internationally operating Max Weber Foundation, which is a distinguishing feature of its cross-border research. As the MWS is embedded in many countries, the different approaches to the political shaping of research freedom are of particularly great importance to it. Therefore, the MWS defines as one of its institutes' mandates the creation of scope for encounters between scientists from different origins. In this respect, the comparative orientation of the Foundation's namesake provides motivation and encouragement: Max Weber's work clearly shows that analyses and theories, of any scope, can only be developed by taking into account and grappling with the research and scientific debates from all parts of the world, including the countries that are not part of the Western world.

Embedding in Germany and worldwide

The MWS, established by resolution of the German Federal Parliament and financed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, is rooted in Germany. It is represented via its institutes in numerous other countries; the sites are selected on the basis of the significance of the country or region for the Federal Republic of Germany in general and for the German scientific community in particular. For the MWS, this permanent and reliable positioning abroad is a prerequisite for being able to fulfil its statutory mandate and to reliably and sustainably promote mutual understanding between Germany and the respective states.

Being a stakeholder in the German research scene, the MWS shares the relevant guidelines and standards of the major science organisations, as underscored by the Alliance of Science Organisations on 27 August 2019 and, above all, affirmed in the Bonn Declaration for acceptance at the Ministerial Conference on the European Research Area, of 20 October 2020. In this spirit, the MWS fully supports the global promotion and strengthening of research freedom.

The MWS institutes are "windows" for the German humanities and social sciences in their host nations. The institutes support, advise and inform scientists from Germany with regard to dealing with location-specific conditions, also in terms of academic freedom. For local scientists, but also for students and persons generally interested, the institutes offer a reliable work environment and enable unique access to the German research scene. For the German public, the MWS institutes are, however, also seismographs for new developments and research trends in the respective host nation. This is of vital importance particularly where the scientific work is subject to societal, historical and, above all, legal frameworks different to those in Germany. It is often evident that academic freedom is not an absolute and therefore actionable value, but is shaped in different ways by the societies and institutions, and is, as such, the subject of critical analysis for which the MWS institutes can offer a framework.

Prerequisites for the MWS' work on site

The MWS can only perform its foundation mandate abroad on the basis of clearly defined prerequisites: The central idea is that the institutes abroad are able to plan and carry out their research independently. An indispensable core element of the MWS is the freedom to be able to develop its own themes in a decentralised way in cooperation with local partners. Without this room for manoeuvre and creative leeway, scientific work within the meaning of foundation law is not possible.

The institutes implement their mandate starting with theme selection right through to the publication of the research results in the host nation. This requires, day in day out, the highest degree of knowledge of the respective existing legal, political and scientific frameworks. Only in this way is it possible for the acting stakeholders, without being subject to specialised constraints, to use their freedom of action optimally and for the purposes of excellent research and the institutes' ability to connect internationally.

Being part of the federal foundation, the MWS institutes abroad have a special status that fundamentally differentiates them on site from institutions organised under private law and, above all, from so-called non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Not least because of this legal framework, the institutes maintain a close dialogue with the German agencies abroad and are aware of their special responsibility in connection with the Federal Republic of Germany's foreign science policy. By defining joint interests and themes in the host nation together with their partners on site, they create overlaps that are indispensable for strengthening and expanding the respective bilateral science links.