Award winners as mediators between worlds: new findings on German-American relations

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Science studies

Award winners as mediators between worlds

New findings on German-American relations

Since 1972 more than 2,000 academics from the USA have been granted Humboldt research awards. What motivates internationally-renowned researchers to accept the invitation to spend a longer period of time researching in Germany? What do they do during their stay and what are its most important consequences? What conclusions can be drawn from this for Germany's attractiveness as a place to pursue science and research?

These questions are examined in a doctoral thesis recently submitted to the Department of Geography at the Heidelberg University. The assessment was based on anonymously-given Humboldt data on all the American award winners from 1972-1996 (n=1,719), a complete postal survey (return rate: 65%, i.e., 1,020 questionnaires), and 61 personal, semi-structured interviews with award winners from the Boston and San Francisco areas.

Amongst the most important consequences of the award winners’ stay is the contribution it makes to forming and maintaining long-term, informal research links across disciplines and national boundaries. Particularly face-to-face contacts on a daily basis lead to surprising scientific results and collaborations which, even in the age of the internet, would not otherwise come about.

After their stay, twice as many academics had closer scientific contacts in Germany than they had before (75%). Almost every second American award winner came back to Germany for a further longer-term stay (often a repeat invitation). About a third of the award winners arranged visits by American post-docs and doctoral students to Germany (Humboldt Fellows amongst others). Most frequently of all, personal contact was continued by German post-docs in the USA (66% of cases; mostly Feodor Lynen Fellows).

An important field for action in higher-educational policy are longer-term visits to the USA by established German professors (e.g., Humboldt hosts). Because of the fundamental differences in the organisation of science and research and due to the lack of programmes on offer, this kind of extended cooperation did not occur very often (less than 10% of cases).

Systematic differences between award winners from differing areas of work and phases of their careers can be seen in the nature of the stay and its consequences. Older American award winners, for example, tend to adopt the role of a discussion partner, advisor, and intermediary for international contacts. Younger award winners are frequently research partners, whose visits are likely to produce more gaugeable results (publications, subsequent mobility).

Close personal contacts to the host and biographical connections to Central Europe influence whether a stay comes about more than any other single factor. As the latter are declining significantly for historical reasons, in future other incentives (scientific, programme-related, cultural) and the strengthening of personal relationships through exchange programmes, will become ever more important in bringing American academics to Germany.

The dissertation places particular emphasis on linking historical-geographic, scientific policy, and theoretical research interests to international academic relations. By formulating an extended actor-network perspective it links up with recent discussions in science studies and, building on this, presents a concept for describing age- and discipline-related cooperative cultures. As well as the internet publication (http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/2125) a book will be published: Jöns, Heike (2002): Grenzüberschreitende Mobilität und Kooperation in den Wissenschaften: Deutschlandsauffenthalte US-amerikanischer Humboldt-Forschungspreisträger aus einer erweiterten Akteursnetzwerkperspektive, Heidelberg (= Heidelberger Geographische Arbeiten 116).