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In Germany, the support provided by foundations to academic research accounts for around 1% of total public-sector academic funding. If foundations wish to have a noticeable impact, it is essential that they define the objectives of their support and formulate an action strategy. They must decide on what belongs to their agenda and what does not. As far as the activities of foundations are concerned, seeking a balance between two agendas – that of the foundation and that of the academic disciplines – is inevitable. To meet the needs of both parties, three rules above all must be adhered to: 1) The foundation's strategy must be transparent. Foundations should be explicit about their goals. 2) The foundation's strategy must be justifiable and justified. 3) Within a justified strategy, the promotion of projects must be aligned with the academic quality of projects as well as with the institutional framework conditions of the supported institution.

Essentially, there are two possible ways in which to formulate a strategy for research funding: on the one hand, science and humanities can be described with respect to its internal rules, its characteristics, its self-control and self-reproduction. From a strategic point of view this leads, for example, to a support of single disciplines, or of young researchers, of international or interdisciplinary collaboration or perhaps science infrastructures. On the other hand, one can also describe science and humanities with respect to its social function, its links and complexities and the impetus it receives from or gives to the outside world. Strategically, this will result, for example, in the promotion of technology transfer, the improvement of a public understanding of science or of research with the express purpose of achieving societal objectives. In the case of Stiftung Mercator, this would mean preventing dangerous climate change or achieving better integration of people of migrant origin through education.

Academic support that follows the three rules can be pursued with both perspectives and strategies derived from them. Identifying the opportunities and deficiencies of the academic system can give rise to possible activities on the part of foundations, as can social objectives. Foundations, being civil society actors, can bring such social objectives within the horizon of academia without being suspected of harbouring political intentions. Even within the framework of a strategy aimed at preventing dangerous climate change, support given to specific projects can be based on their academic quality. Support can be goal-oriented yet aimed at no predetermined outcome.

Where support is made available to universities, their advancement towards greater self-responsibility and self-control in the recent years is both an opportunity and an obligation for the activities of foundations. The opportunity is the possibility to negotiate directly with universities as project partners, while the obligation is to do this while respecting the goals of the respective partners. If this is achieved, support can serve the foundation's agenda while at the same time achieving the university's development goals. This means renouncing originality as end in itself and focusing on the sustainable value of research funding instead.