

doc.funds Evaluation: FWF Statement

The evaluation report compiled by 3s and CHEPS confirms the strategic value of the doc.funds program for Austria as a hub for research and innovation.

The doc.funds program has proven to be an effective tool for making research institutions in Austria attractive to young, international talent and for providing the best possible support. A key factor here is the ability to recruit highly qualified doctoral candidates and offer them secure funding. Even though doc.funds can be viewed as a focused rather than a broad-based program due to its limited financial and time resources, it nevertheless offers the funded projects a space where innovative approaches can emerge and develop. These approaches have the potential to trigger institutional changes and strengthen structured doctoral training at the respective research institutions.

This funding format has significantly transformed the academic culture at the institutions, initiating a shift towards team-oriented doctoral supervision, productive interdisciplinary discourse, and higher standards in quality assurance. At the same time, doc.funds has also opened up new opportunities for collaboration and research, both within and between research institutions, extending beyond the projects' durations.

The analyses and recommendations contained in the evaluation report now give the FWF the opportunity to further improve the program. For the next phase of development, the focus will primarily be on the following strategic areas of action:

- **Prioritization**: The program will continue to be fundamentally open to all disciplines and will not set any thematic or disciplinary priorities. This openness guarantees the necessary academic freedom and gives all disciplines equal opportunity to establish and expand structured doctoral programs. Nevertheless, a detailed analysis will be conducted to determine how subject areas and research fields that have been underrepresented to date can be better integrated into the program in the future to ensure the greatest possible scientific diversity.
- **Long-term funding**: Discussions will be needed on how to optimize the strategic division of responsibilities between the participating research institutions and the FWF to ensure reliable and improved long-term funding for doctoral schools. This involves, in particular, questions regarding increased (financial and administrative) support as well as greater commitment from the research institutions.
- **Decision-making process**: To maintain the highest standards of excellence, discussions will be needed regarding the specific requirements – at each phase of the review process – for both applicants and their respective research institutions, as well as for reviewers. This includes the design and evaluation of research programs, the design and evaluation of training programs, and the contributions and institutional commitments required from the research institutions.
- **Flexibility**: Modern research requires a high degree of agility. The FWF will be exploring how to best meet the diverse demands for more flexible collaboration opportunities.

This applies in particular to increased international exchange, networking between different research institutions, and building bridges between different sectors, such as business and society.

- Training programs: A comprehensive qualification that goes beyond purely technical knowledge is essential, especially since the majority of doctoral students will not remain in academia. As Figure 63 (p. 107) of the evaluation report shows, not all doctoral schools currently offer training in a sufficient and systematic range of so-called “transferable skills.” However, these interdisciplinary competencies are of crucial importance both for a successful academic career and for career paths outside of academia. For this reason, it will be necessary to discuss which offerings in the area of additional qualifications can be made mandatory for training programs in the future.
- Career tracking: To better assess the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of funding, a comprehensive study is planned for the upcoming 2027–2029 funding period. This study will examine well-founded conceptual and methodological approaches to allow the FWF to track and evaluate the career paths of grant recipients and their broader societal impact even more precisely in the future. The strategic focus here will be primarily on early-stage researchers and their individual career paths.