



# Understanding Society – Shaping the Future

BMBF programme for the humanities  
and social sciences (2019–2025)





# Table of contents

Introduction to the Framework Programme	2
<hr/>	
1. Mastering social challenges: strengthening cohesion, innovation and cultural heritage	3
<hr/>	
1.1 Strengthening social cohesion	5
1.2 Promoting social innovation	6
1.3 Envisaging cultural heritage	7
<hr/>	
2. Creating design and development freedom for science	10
<hr/>	
2.1 Freedom for science in an international context	10
2.2 Developing and strengthening disciplines and research fields	11
2.3 Experimental freedom for future issues	12
<hr/>	
3. Developing research data infrastructures for specific needs	14
<hr/>	
3.1 Integration into the National Research Data Infrastructure (NFDI)	14
3.2 Improving access to and interdisciplinary use of infrastructures	15
3.3 Advancing method development	15
3.4 Promoting European collaboration	16
<hr/>	
Imprint	17

# Introduction to the Framework Programme

Today's societies are under a great deal of pressure to change and face the challenge of helping to create a future that makes a good life accessible for as many people as possible. The humanities and social sciences make an indispensable contribution to these efforts, as they take a critical look at social developments and systems and develop and provide guidance and practical knowledge with a focus on society.

As a result, they play a key role in helping to create a successful future.

The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) will further strengthen the potential of the humanities and social sciences to help equip society for the future. In the years to come, the 'Understanding Society – Shaping the Future' programme will intensify and expand support for the humanities and social sciences in three areas of focus:

1. Mastering social challenges: strengthening research on cohesion, innovation and cultural heritage
2. Creating design and development freedom for science
3. Developing research data infrastructures for specific needs

In all three areas of focus, the BMBF will support the mutual transfer of knowledge between research, politics and society, structural development of the humanities and social sciences, and their internationalisation as interdisciplinary tasks. The BMBF is thus providing a wide range of funding instruments which enable flexible application in line with requirements and can be further developed on a continuous basis and adapted to accommodate topic-specific demands. The three areas of focus of the 'Understanding Society – Shaping the Future' programme perfectly complement the BMBF research objectives and play a key role in implementing the federal government's strategies, including the High-Tech Strategy 2025 and Germany's National Sustainable Development Strategy, as well as the European Union's research programmes. There will be an external evaluation of the programme results after a period of five years.

# 1. Mastering social challenges: strengthening cohesion, innovation and cultural heritage

Germany and Europe have some major challenges to overcome in the 21st century: globalisation, international competition, technological change, digitisation, global migration, an ageing population, polarisation within societies, cultural and religious divergences, intergovernmental conflicts and geopolitical crises. How we master these challenges will have an impact on whether our future lives are shaped by peace, freedom and prosperity or conflict and instability.

Key criteria for overcoming these challenges are:

- Strong social cohesion
- High capacity for social innovation
- A vibrant cultural heritage

Strong cohesion – both nationally and internationally – makes it possible to establish successful social dynamics. In a pluralistic and ever-changing society, it fosters tolerance, solidarity and a focus on public welfare, and allows people to lead a life of safety, freedom and satisfaction despite all their differences. A society needs to be able and eager to pursue innovation if it has any hope of proactively overcoming present and future social challenges for the benefit of all people. Cultural heritage forms the foundation of self-understanding and well-being for many people and is an important resource for guiding any upheavals and changes to successful completion in turbulent times.

The BMBF will promote **research in the humanities and social sciences for practical applications**, with the aim of strengthening cohesion, innovation and cultural heritage. Potential actors in politics, administration, civil society and business will be involved in the research process and help shape it with their questions and practical knowledge. The aim is to ensure that academic findings and recommendations for action can actually be incorporated and put into practice. The BMBF will support suitable measures (platforms, events, exhibitions, consolidation of consultancy and communication expertise in science, etc.) during projects to promote professional and targeted knowledge sharing. In addition, there will be an increased focus on promoting synthesis and transfer projects which evaluate the research status of especially topical and urgent issues and promptly provide scientifically sound and practical knowledge on activity and decision-making.

In order to be feasible, solutions require critical understanding and analysis of the underlying social issues as well as historical-cultural contexts and developments. The BMBF will thus promote **fundamental research in the humanities and social sciences**, which tends to take several years. For complex challenges whose research requires a variety of expert perspectives, interdisciplinary research collaboration will also be strengthened across the board. Fundamental research will also be encouraged to consider any potential application references early on.

Another key aim of the BMBF is to strengthen **dialogue with the public**. Issues surrounding social cohesion, social innovation and cultural heritage, in particular, are often a controversial topic of discussion. The humanities and social sciences can make a significant contribution to the objectivity of public opinion and provide guidance. In its efforts to support research, the BMBF will therefore promote the mutual transfer of knowledge between science and society over the long term. There will also be an effort to more aggressively exploit opportunities that allow the public to get involved in research (e.g. citizen science, living labs).

Wherever there is **structural demand or potential in the scientific system** for research on topic-relevant issues and for the transfer of knowledge on cohesion, innovation and cultural heritage, the BMBF will take suitable measures such as the formation of centres, networking, consolidation of university research, and support for young academics. The established collaborative research at BMBF will be continued and further developed to strengthen collaboration between disciplines and institutions, in particular.

The BMBF will support **internationalisation of the humanities and social sciences** over the long term, which is particularly important due to the international scale of many social challenges and the increasing demand for the ability to collaborate across borders and thus carry out outstanding research.

## 1.1 Strengthening social cohesion

Strengthening social cohesion is a top priority for the federal government. This cohesion is currently under pressure from different directions in Germany and Europe. Religious and political extremism threaten social peace, whilst nationalistic and authoritarian political concepts are gaining ground in many countries. There are quite a few people who feel excluded from social participation and social acceptance or see their cultural roots as suppressed. Internationally, particularly outside of Europe and the West, there's an increase in centrifugal forces that question the tried-and-tested structures and institutions of intergovernmental collaboration and threaten to fan the flames of mutual resentment and conflicts.

The BMBF will emphasise the importance of **research on social cohesion** in the coming years by promoting the development of a research institute for social cohesion. The institute will primarily be tasked with analysing current social trends and developments related to social cohesion as well as their historical roots.

The BMBF will provide comprehensive support for research on preventing and restricting **social radicalisation**. Among other things, the social causes and consequences of religious and political extremism will be examined and compared, with special attention paid to suitable countermeasures. The research will primarily focus on populism, right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism, Islamism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, antiziganism and other forms of denigration of and hostility towards people and groups of the population.

There will be an increase in research on **migration and integration**. Germany stands to benefit from an influx of people and can offer them major opportunities in return. But both immigrants and the host society face the challenges of effective integration, which is essential for a successful life together. Particularly in face of the high number of immigrants in past years, scientific findings can help to avoid mistakes in integration as well as advance and spread promising approaches.

**Diversity and inequality** – whether economic, social, regional and/or cultural – are features of pluralistic, open societies. Depending on how pronounced they are, diversity and inequality can have a positive or negative impact on social development. Many people now have the feeling that society is drifting too far apart in many areas and that more and more people have less and less in common. Comprehensive research will therefore be carried out on diversity and inequality, with a focus on their varying degrees of intensity, interdependencies and causes as well as their social consequences particularly on social participation and cohesion.

**Liberal democracy** plays a key role in social peace and is the form of government that ensures maximum freedom, co-determination, balance and participation for citizens. But efforts to integrate these have been on the decline for years now, challenged both internally and externally by populist, radical, nationalistic, and anti-liberal powers. The BMBF will promote research with the aim of strengthening the defensibility, functioning and legitimacy of liberal democracy. There's a need for research on a variety of issues, including inefficiencies, a lack of representation, and new forms of participation by different social groups.

**Cohesion in Europe** is priceless and has brought about seven decades of peace and prosperity on most of the continent. And yet the centrifugal forces are increasing, both inside Europe and between Europe and neighbouring countries and partners overseas. We urgently need new answers on how to ensure peace, safety and collaboration in Europe in the 21st century for the benefit of people and which role Europe can assume in the world of tomorrow.

## 1.2 Promoting social innovation

A society's potential for innovation and renewal plays a significant role in improving life for people in concrete ways and further developing society as a whole. Innovative ideas for issues such as mobility, living, health, environmental protection and social coexistence increase our material and immaterial prosperity and help to overcome the challenges of the present and future. This not only requires innovation in technology and business, but also, in large part, in education, science, civil society, politics, art, culture and administration.

The support for the humanities and social sciences will therefore also focus on the issue of how to promote societies' potential for renewal and innovation across the board.

This requires a comprehensive understanding of the **foundation of an innovative society** which is full of ideas, open to the future and able to change and make a contribution. The social, political, cultural and environmental foundation of **the 'innovative society' of tomorrow** will also be researched on the basis of existing research. What role do values, standards, ethical issues and free political order play today? How do developments such as digitisation, migration, globalisation, an ageing population and increasing diversity accelerate or decelerate the development and spread of forward-looking social, technological and other innovations? How do you promote creative potential, establish an open culture of innovation or tear down resistance to innovation? How much dynamism, on the one hand, and stability and proven success, on the other, does a society need to be able to develop and implement new ideas?

Social development that benefits people also needs to take into account the **impacts of innovations** and the **consequences of a continued focus on innovation**. Innovations occasionally lead to changes that extend far beyond the sphere of activity they were originally developed for. These groundbreaking innovations and social renewal processes that touch many different areas of life, in particular, can lead to far-reaching medium and long-term changes to existing social structures, sociocultural practices and normative orders. What kind of impact would it have on, for example, social interaction, political systems or personal autonomy if one day artificial intelligence were to replace human abilities and decision-making? If a society's structures, institutions and orders focus on the aim of continuous innovation and question long-standing norms, values and identities, the effects will be no less far-reaching. If the innovative society has any hope of enriching people's lives, innovations and proven approaches need to be categorised according to context – for example, history, culture or social repercussions – whilst unintended and seemingly ambivalent developments need to be researched with a focus on their social consequences. This is the only way to take full advantage of the potential of innovations and minimise social risks.

It's occasionally important to go beyond practical knowledge and expertise in the humanities, cultural sciences and social sciences and draw on findings from business, engineering, technology and natural sciences, especially when it comes to fundamental and application-oriented research on social requirements and the impacts of an innovative society and, in particular, when this research also appropriately considers the interplay of social, technical and non-technical innovations. The BMBF will also systematically enable broadly based research collaboration across multiple disciplines primarily for social sciences and humanities projects.

### 1.3 Envisaging cultural heritage

With its many different material and immaterial expressions, cultural heritage forms the foundation of our present and future. It serves as a basis on which to successfully shape processes of change that occasionally question the status quo and tried-and-tested solutions through its ability to communicate identity and the values that bring people together. It's extremely important, particularly when it comes to facing social challenges, as these challenges always have a cultural dimension as well. A society that envisages, actively uses and questions its cultural heritage and thus keeps it alive not only increases its level of reflection, but also expands its scope for action.

The BMBF would like to exploit the potential of cultural heritage for the future shaping and further development of society. Research that fully examines the cultural foundations of societies will also be promoted, taking advantage of, in particular, the synergies and opportunities for working together through European research collaboration.

Understanding and working with today's social developments requires a **look at the past**. This programme will strengthen the interdisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences for cultural traditions, historical heritage and the historical foundations of cultural heritage. One of the primary focuses of the research is East Germany's history and heritage.

There will also be an effort to advance topics of research which take a look at the **value of cultural heritage in overcoming social challenges**. The idea is to present the opportunities and risks which are revealed when examining cultural heritage for the purpose of social applications. The potential to integrate cultural heritage as well as its potential for social creativity and innovations will also be taken into account. Examples include the role of material and immaterial cultural heritage as a driver of sustainable development in rural and urban habitats, the social significance of the development and preservation of intercultural practices, and the contribution of long-standing scientific and experience-based knowledge about overcoming social challenges.

There will be comprehensive support for **research in the humanities and social sciences with the material cultural heritage** preserved at museums and universities and in archives. These collections are priceless for research, and their research potential is far from being fully exploited. The BMBF will therefore further develop the existing, favourably evaluated funding priority for collection-related research. The funding programme, 'The Language of Objects', will further advance interdisciplinary collection research, research networking both inside and outside universities, young academics in Material Culture Studies, and international collaborations, as well as incorporate issues related to conservation science such as research issues closely related to the humanities and social sciences.

To exploit the **scientific potential of university collections** for research over the long term, the Coordination Centre for Scientific University Collections in Germany, which makes a valuable contribution to networking and establishing university collections in the academic landscape, and the favourably evaluated funding programme entitled 'Interlink – Access – Research. Alliance for University Collections' will be continued.

The eHeritage programme will also be used to maintain comprehensive support of **research-related digitisation of collections** and the development of digitisation technologies and simulation models for cultural assets. The digitisation of cultural assets is an important foundation for the further development of collection-related research and establishes new research questions and methods, including in new research fields in the humanities and social sciences. The BMBF-supported Marbach-Weimar-Wolfenbüttel research cluster will advance this field as a paradigm.

## 2. Creating design and development freedom for science

A society of the future needs to strengthen scientific diversity and freedom if it wants to keep not just one but a whole host of future opportunities open for its design. The humanities and social sciences also require the freedom to pursue topics of research beyond the specifications of public funding announcements, so that they can provide relevant guidance and application-based knowledge for politics and society. This also provides them with the opportunity to further develop their disciplines and research fields with science as a driving force, or establish new disciplines. At the same time, it's also essential to enable examination of unconventional research issues and the testing of new approaches outside of mainstream science. With selected support measures, the BMBF will help to provide the humanities and social sciences with extensive freedom for design and development.

### 2.1 Freedom for science in an international context

Science requires the freedom to flourish in a way that is productive. When it comes to research in the humanities and social sciences, freedom primarily refers to time and an environment that promotes creativity, with the opportunity to ask scientifically motivated research questions and examine these issues. The BMBF will therefore continue the two large-scale, tried-and-tested funding instruments: the Käte Hamburger International Centres and Merian Centres.

The **Käte Hamburger International Centres** funding line received an excellent rating in 2017. In collaboration with Käte Hamburger International Centres, the BMBF offers researchers in the fields of humanities and social sciences the opportunity to research topics of their own choosing with outstanding national and international scientists, free from the many obligations of everyday academic life. Future International Centres will be able to focus on new, innovative issues and offer the humanities and social sciences greater scope for design. Efforts will also be made to help the Käte Hamburger International Centres which have already been successfully established at many university locations to promote new topic-specific and personal development.

Like no other instrument, the **Merian Centres** in various regions around the world allow the humanities and social sciences to advance research in larger transnational work contexts for periods exceeding a decade. Additional Merian Centres will be built in countries and regions which are relevant for science and research policy.

A programme open to new topics will also be used to create scientific **freedom for**

**international (young) research groups.** Consistently drawing on the standard of 'research with' rather than 'research on', scientists in Germany are offered opportunities to form research groups with their colleagues abroad.

## 2.2 Developing and strengthening disciplines and research fields

Free and innovative research is based on the diversity and networking of strong disciplines and research fields. The BMBF will continue to support selected disciplines and research fields and further develop structurally in reference to new scientific and research policy demands, all with the aim of ensuring its efficiency and capacity for international collaboration over the long term. Areas of focus include strengthening university profiles and specialisations, networking research both inside and outside universities and supporting young academics.

**Small disciplines** are of fundamental importance. More than 100 small disciplines currently shape the German university landscape and around 80 per cent of these can be found in the humanities, cultural sciences, social sciences and economics. Small disciplines are an important component of the diverse range of university disciplines, supporting the plurality of perspectives and thus enabling a more complex and differentiated view of the world. They also play a major role in shaping the profile and structure of German universities and have a notable impact on their perception and recognition abroad. And still many small disciplines are under pressure to demonstrate their legitimacy, which is why the BMBF considers it essential to emphasise the strengths of small disciplines for the university landscape and promote them in a targeted fashion. They will be supported with an extensive funding portfolio of measures for networking and supporting young academics as well as digital opportunities for research and teaching. The Small Disciplines department at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, which examines and documents the situation and development of small disciplines at German universities, will be further supported.

In recent years, the BMBF has provided significant support for the **establishment of Islamic theology as an academic discipline** at German universities. Five centres for Islamic theology have been supported in Germany since 2011. To further strengthen this new academic discipline, the development of two additional centres will be supported. The BMBF would also like to help consolidate the position of Islamic theology as a specialist discipline in the academic system, for example, by promoting collaboration with neighbouring disciplines to create overarching specialised topics.

The global transformation affects all areas of life and changes the make-up of our society and life together, increasing the demand for knowledge about other regions around the world. Answers to the big, cross-border questions can only be found through international collaboration. In recent years, the BMBF has played a key role in helping to strengthen **regional studies** in Germany and structurally anchor them in the academic system. On that basis, the BMBF will further support the establishment of research focuses for regional studies at German universities. At the same time, new opportunities will be created to ensure that the expertise acquired here can find its way to decision makers in politics and society. The principle will continue to be 'research with' rather than 'research on'. In addition, there are new instruments available that enable more intensive, longer collaboration as well as exchange with research partners in other parts of the world (see 2.1 International, young research groups).

The research and socio-political demands made of **peace and conflict research** in Germany have changed in the face of a new global political situation and the growing threat resulting from geopolitical crises and conflicts within societies. The BMBF has therefore asked the German Council of Science and Humanities to evaluate the research field and provide recommendations for further developing it. Based on the results of the evaluation, which are expected in 2019, the BMBF will make a decision concerning any measures required for strengthening peace and conflict research in Germany.

More recently, **Digital Humanities** has drastically increased the potential to produce knowledge in the humanities. Digital scientific methods offer the opportunity to research new issues that cannot be addressed with any methods available at present. In the future, the aim will be to further exploit the major opportunities in this research field. The BMBF will also support the theoretical, methodical and technical further development of Digital Humanities in a targeted fashion. In particular, multimodal objects of examination as well as research issues of interest across multiple disciplines will take centre stage.

### 2.3 Experimental freedom for future issues

Asking unorthodox questions, applying new, untested methods, failing and beginning over again are all basic requirements for sciences that are forever evolving. At the same time, these can result in findings that allow societies to successfully respond even to unexpected developments, which is why the BMBF will provide opportunity spaces for experimental, high-risk research – most importantly also for younger specialist scientists. With freedom in terms of topic, research will be supported which

generates new fundamental and application-based knowledge, which in turn can serve as a basis for shaping new developments in science and society.

The planned **funding line 'Future Issues in the Humanities and Social Sciences'** will facilitate the development of innovative and extraordinary ideas in humanities and social sciences research for the first time. This funding programme is designed to provide new research ideas with the opportunity for (further) development ahead of structured funding programmes. Suitable, new evaluation and selection processes will be tested to improve the chances of success for original and extraordinary ideas. The 'Future Issues in the Humanities and Social Sciences' funding programme will focus on project ideas which ...

- address current social issues or identify emerging problem areas
- pursue innovative concepts for the further development of disciplines and for the development of new fields of knowledge
- develop experimental forms of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary cooperation
- identify the potential of research results for transfer into social practice and draw up transfer strategies

The projects developed within the framework of this funding programme can apply for additional support within the humanities and social sciences programme or other BMBF funding measures as part of a competitive process. A high degree of flexibility in the funding instruments will also ensure that innovative project ideas can be processed or further pursued as required – whether it's in the narrower field of research or in the mutual transfer of research and practical knowledge.

### 3. Developing research data infrastructures for specific needs

Exceptional fundamental and application-oriented research on social problems requires efficient research data infrastructures as well as appropriately processed data.

Research in social sciences as well as large parts of the humanities and, in particular, on language and text can draw on an effectively expanded digital database – this includes data collected through panels and surveys as well as literature and language corpora. For other research fields and disciplines, this digital database needs to be developed in the years to come, for example, through the digitisation of existing sources in collections and archives.

There will also be efforts to ensure better integration of research infrastructures for practical and application-oriented issues as well as improve the usability of existing data from a variety of sources for the purpose of research. The BMBF will thus do its fair share to further develop academic disciplines and Digital Humanities, which refers to the use of computer-supported processes and digital resources in the humanities and social sciences.

The enormous dynamism of digitisation is responsible for the fact that, in addition to the development of infrastructures, professional management of research data – meaning the collection, exploitation, indexing and archiving of data – is becoming more and more important. The fundamental principles for optimal dissemination and follow-up use of research data and findings are the FAIR principles (*findable, accessible, interoperable, reusable*).

#### **3.1 Integration into the National Research Data Infrastructure (NFDI)**

The aim of the BMBF is to support integration of the humanities and social sciences infrastructures into a National Research Data Infrastructure (NFDI), as recommended by the Council for Information Infrastructures (RfII), which is jointly appointed by the federal government and states. A dynamic network of established actors will be created that guarantees coordination, collaboration and shared standards in research data management.

This also requires a consolidation process for the social sciences panel and survey landscape. On the one hand, this entails consolidating proven research infrastructures which will also provide the required scientific data in the future. On the other,

the funding for infrastructure measures needs to be assessed to determine if it might run out, for example, because certain data have been collected several times through different panels or surveys. Measures also occasionally need to be brought to a close to ensure that the strong growth of past years does not lead to the blocking of new, sensible infrastructures. The BMBF is thus firm in its support of solutions which make it possible to add innovative elements to existing infrastructures.

### **3.2 Improving access to and interdisciplinary use of infrastructures**

Research infrastructures need to be available for the full extent of research in the humanities and social sciences. Many infrastructures have only ever been used by a few disciplines. But the academic sources available are of high scientific value for a whole host of issues. They're processed in a variety of disciplines with very different and not always predictable issues. The data standards, labelling categories and tools used are inconsistent as a result of varying discipline traditions, often preventing more widespread use. The BMBF therefore supports, in particular, the further development of data, tool and interface interoperability across multiple disciplines.

### **3.3 Advancing method development**

The aim of the BMBF is to improve access to and use of qualitative and quantitative data for the humanities and social sciences. While social sciences research is based on the use of both quantitative and qualitative data, qualitative social sciences data have never been sufficiently reflected in existing infrastructures. The BMBF supports the further development of corresponding concepts and methods and promotes an increase in exchange with the humanities. When it comes to Digital Humanities, research data management focuses on processing qualitative data. But with the increasing availability of digital data, quantitative access is becoming more important even for the humanities, so that both the humanities and social sciences can benefit from joint method development.

### 3.4 Promoting European collaboration

Efforts to embed the national research infrastructures in the European context will be further advanced. European research infrastructures provide the opportunity to work more intensively on an international scale than in the past and use resources together across country borders. Member states of the European Union, additional associated countries and the European Commission have joined forces in the European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI) to coordinate and bundle their activities in the field of research infrastructures throughout Europe. Currently in development, the European Open Science Cloud (EOSC) will allow research findings and data to be used and reused by all, which will not only benefit science, but also business and society. BMBF has supported the development of five European humanities and social sciences research infrastructures thus far, which as ESFRI Landmarks now have an extensive range of users. In the future, all nations involved will need to sufficiently further develop the European research infrastructures for social sciences and the humanities, which will prove to be indispensable over the long term, and permanently preserve them through institutionalisation.

**You can find further information about the ‘Understanding Society – Shaping the Future’ programme on the following pages:**  
[bmbf.de/de/geistes-und-sozialwissenschaften-152.html](http://bmbf.de/de/geistes-und-sozialwissenschaften-152.html)  
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