

Beyond peer review – double blind and partially randomized selection in two ‘small grant’ programs

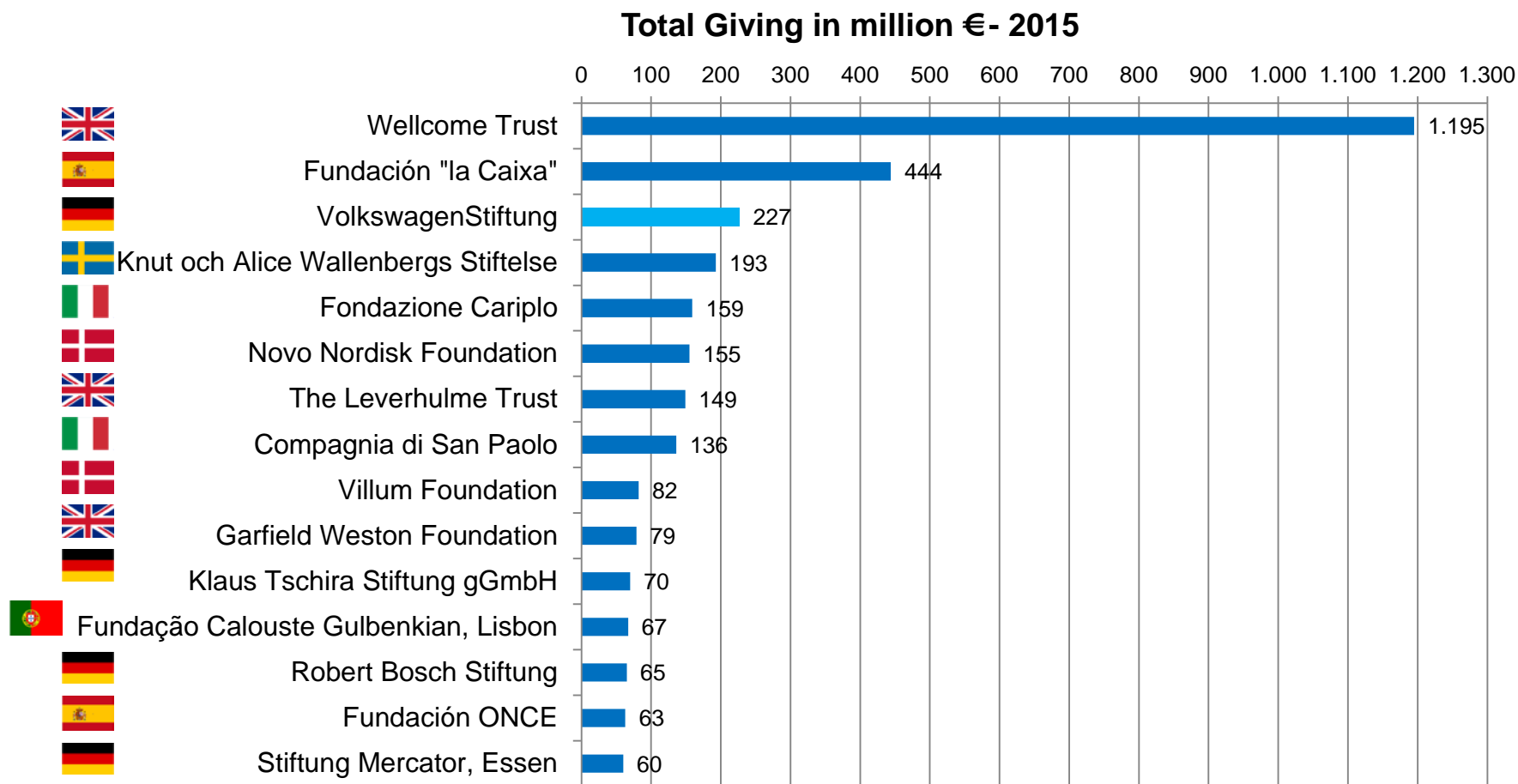
Ulrike Bischler

Amsterdam, 29 June 2017

NWO International Peer Review Conference



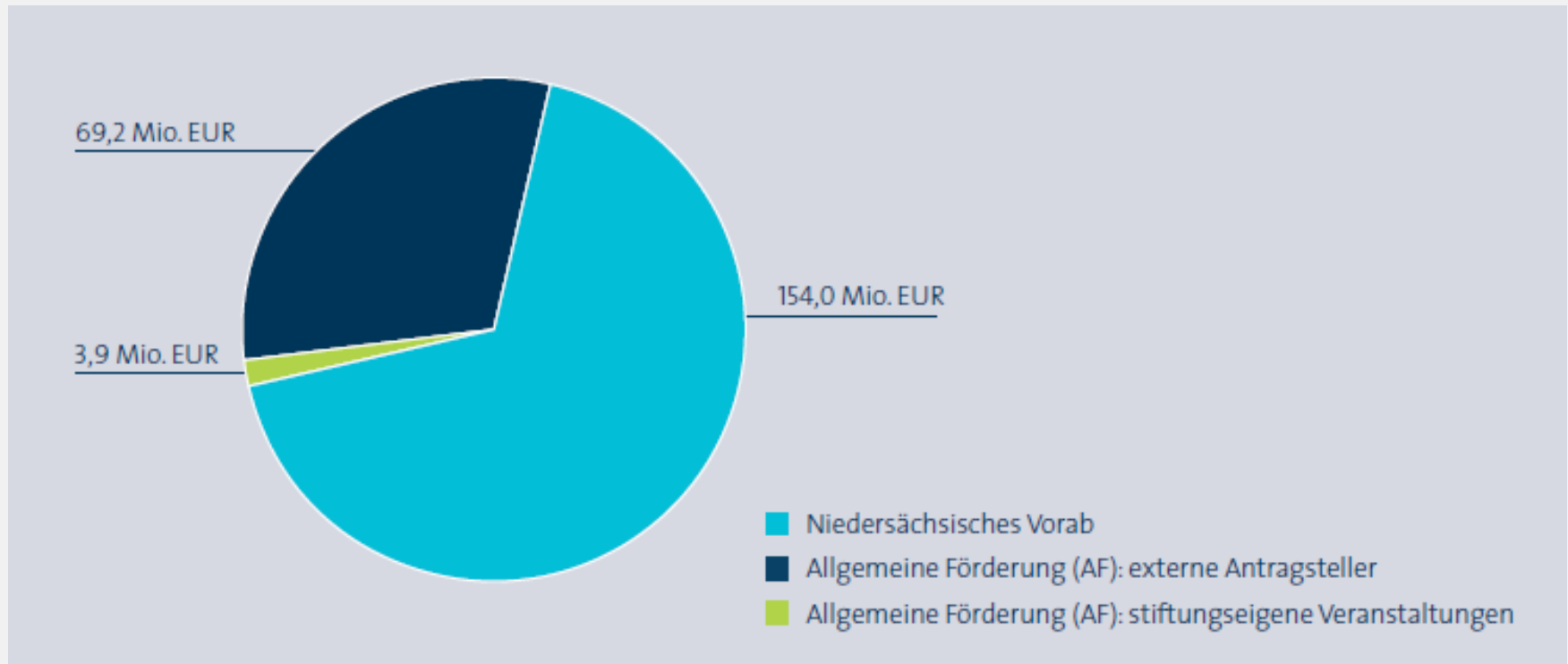
Top 15 European Private Charitable Foundations by Total Giving p.a.



Total Grant Volume in 2015

€227 million


Small Grants ('Original – Isn't it' & 'Experiment!') €3.4 million





Original – Isn't it?

Deadline: November 15, 2017

 Originalitätsverdacht

 humanities and cultural studies, theoretical social sciences

 research projects; funding of a teaching substitute

 up to 80.000 or 150.000 Euro (depending on funding line)

 12 or 18 months (depending on funding line)

Career stage:

Postdoctoral researchers & professors (in )

Total (2015, 2017):





€3.2 Mio., 34 grants out of 600 proposals



Experiment! – In Search of Bold Research Ideas

Deadline: July 5, 2017



-  science and engineering, life sciences
-  research projects
-  up to 120,000 Euro (flexible use)
-  up to 18 months

Career stage:

Postdoctoral researchers & professors (in )

Total (2013-2016):

€6.7 Mio. € 67 grants out of 2303 proposals

Specific funding aims ↔ review procedures

Original – Isn't it?

- originality as a crucial criterion of quality in the humanities
- initial exploration of an original research direction opening up new perspectives, desired result is an essay

Experiment! – In search of bold research ideas

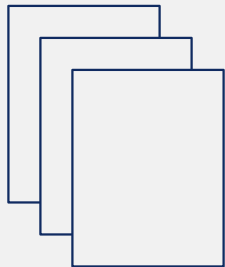
- 'out-of-the-box' thinking, risky & too premature for regular schemes
- initial exploration of radically new topics or methods characterized by a high risk and a hard-to-predict outcome (incl. failure)

→ **Selection process aligned with the nature of the research.
Readiness to take a risk by the Foundation, too.**

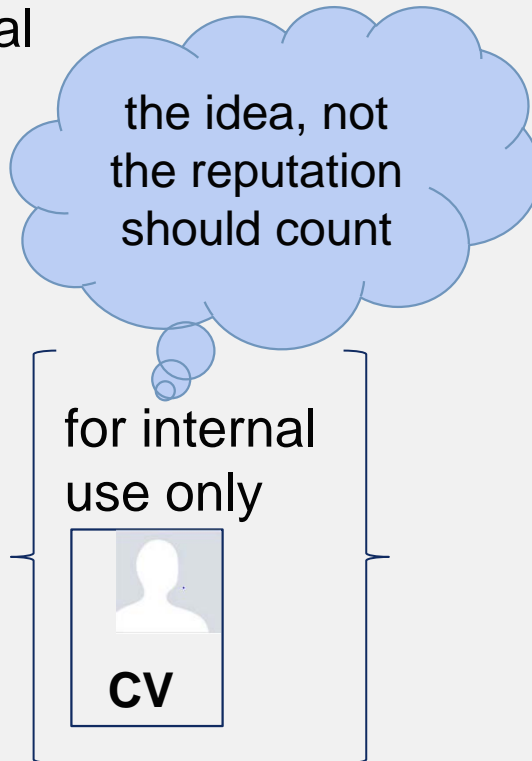
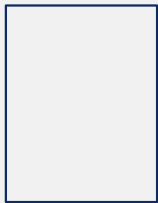
How to pick the right projects?

Newly designed application & review process

Short Proposal



+ Self-Assessment



- short standardized applications
- shortlist pre-selected in-house
- external jury (8-9 scientists)
- anonymized selection
- optional funding joker, 1 p. p.
- no additional review reports



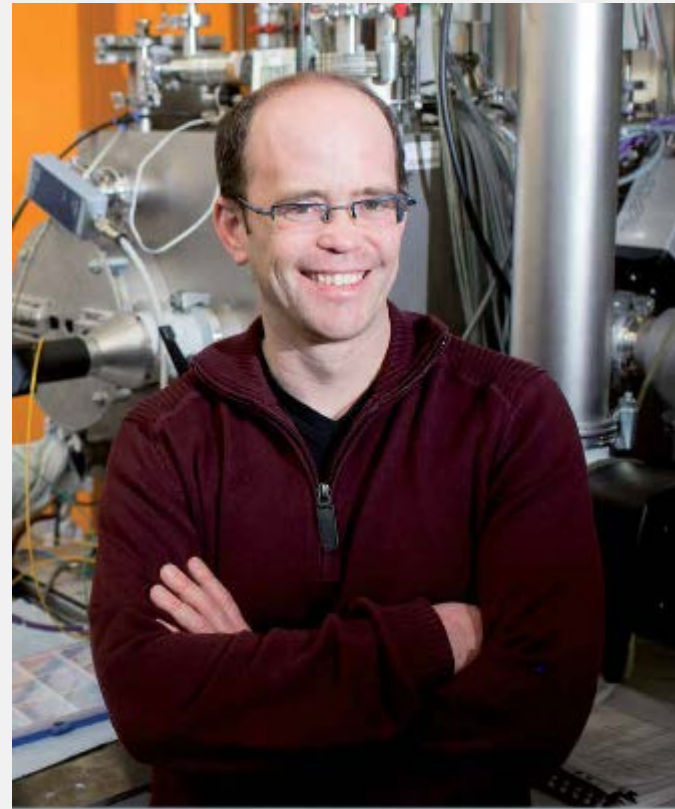
Trends in application numbers

Experiment!	received	short-listed	funded	completed
2013	704	93	13	12
2014	630	102	19	12
2015	426	103	17	0
2016	544	102	18	0
2017 partial randomization	up-coming deadline		envisaged 30-40	

Original - ...?	received	short-listed	funded	completed
2015	387	107	16	0
2017	213	98	18	0

Course and outcomes

- ‘Forum Experiment!’ held twice
- 24 (of 67) grants concluded
- 1 patent, 80 % have published, 4 follow-up grants (€ 1.2 million)
- 1 clear and 2 partial failures
- ‘Forum Originalitätsverdacht?’ held once
- outcomes look promising
- all projects still running



Can we do better?

Some findings in ‘Experiment!’

- equal success rates for sciences, engineering, and life sciences
- first hint that ‘small’ disciplines are under-represented in grants
- experience and qualification matter: higher success rate for senior researchers/professors
- women under-represented despite anonymous selection (shortlist: 1 in 4, grants: 1 in 6)
- Bias, diversity, reproducibility?





Alternative assessment or allocation schemes suggested in the literature

- Traditional peer review
 - slow/conservative/bias, at least 200 reviews/reviewers needed
- Crowd-based peer review
 - confidentiality of applications, how to keep reviewers engaged?
- Continuous, not dichotomous funding
 - reduces small sum further, underfunded projects
- Participative element
 - advantage for topics known from the media or from every-day life
- Same procedure with an enlarged jury
 - still limited expertise present or one advocate for each discipline

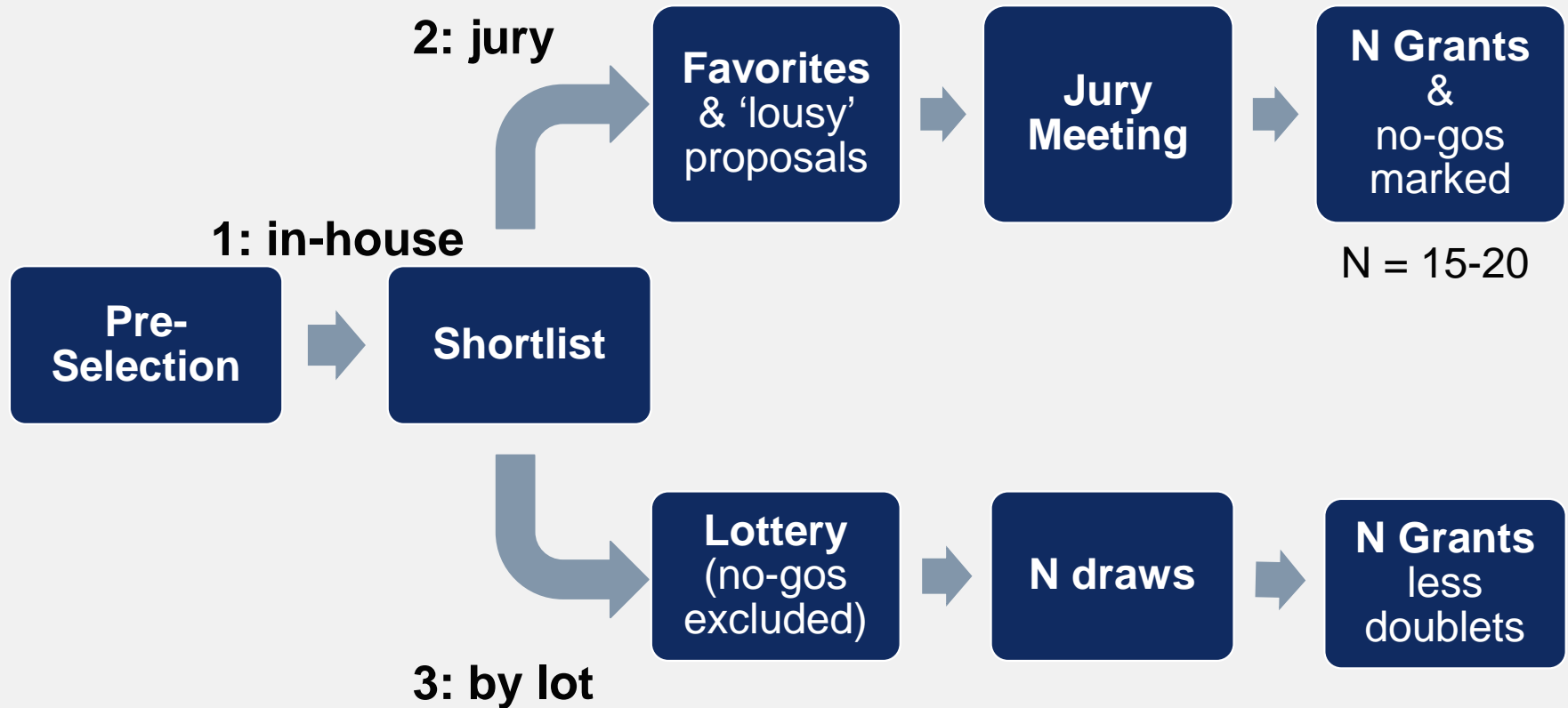
Decision by lot – chances and limits

- The lot is blind in a positive and a negative sense:
 - 😊 no bias, equal chances for controversial approaches and for topics under-represented in jury
 - 😊 representative, full diversity
 - 😞 no rationale, no quality distinction
 - 😞 special effort is not rewarded
- framing important
- only in combination with quality screening
- test phase & evaluation (calls 2017-2020)





Partially randomized selection in 'Experiment!'

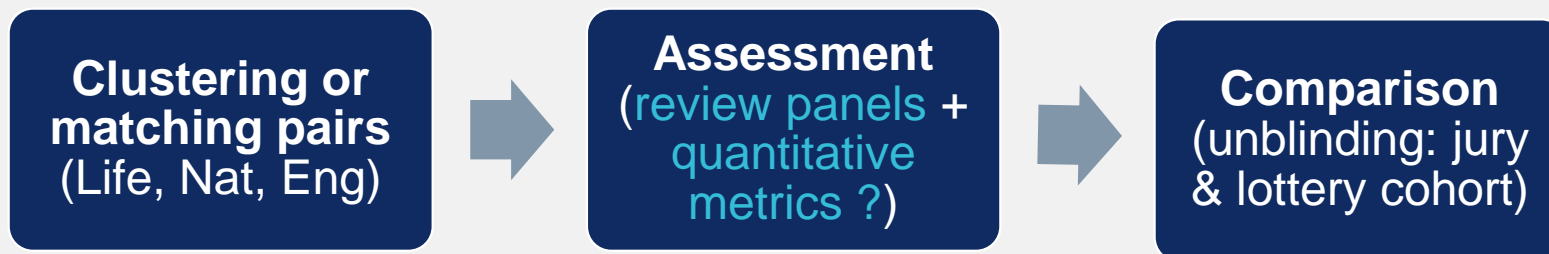


in total (jury & lot): approx. 30-40 grants

Accompanying research and evaluation



- after 4 calls (2017-2020): ~150 projects, 50:50 jury and lottery
- project finished 2.5 years after grant: first in 2020, last in 2023



Final remarks

- choice of review procedure in line with the funding aim is important
- funders should take a risk and test new ways of assessing proposals
- Example I: Villum Foundation, Denmark
Villum Experiment (since 2017) – double blind selection, trump
- Example II: Health Research Council, New Zealand
Explorer Grants (since 2013) – decision by lot after pre-selection
- Volkswagen Foundation is just starting a test with decision by lot.
- We are very excited what we will learn from it.

Thank you!

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