

FALLING WALLS SCIENCE SUMMIT



KEY RESULTS OF THE ROUND TABLE

“PHILANTHROPY & SCIENCE: DRIVING ADVANCES IN INNOVATION”

— *Philanthropy must take risks the public sector cannot – backing bold ideas, people and places that reconnect science with society.*

Public research systems are under pressure: core funding is volatile, risk tolerance is low and cross-border, cross-disciplinary work still struggles to find a home. The panel argued that science philanthropy can and must move faster. It should focus on de-risking transformative projects, backing under-served fields and career stages, and investing in engagement so discoveries translate into societal benefit.

Philanthropic funding in science has already demonstrated its leverage, from small travel grants that launch careers to endowed institutes that buffer universities against volatile public budgets. Foundations are experimenting with anonymous, idea-driven calls, long-term institute partnerships, school-to-postdoc talent pipelines and leadership training that universities rarely provide. They are also filling structural gaps that public funders overlook like supporting open software, public-facing documentaries and programmes that embed social scientists, ethicists and civic actors directly into research teams. The next step is to scale these approaches collectively and across borders.

THE PANEL CALL TO ACTION:

1 — Fund what public systems cannot: high-risk, gap-filling research and infrastructure.

Prioritise early-stage, cross-boundary projects, shared facilities and software that are unlikely to win conventional grants, and use philanthropic capital to de-risk ideas so that public and private funders can later scale what works.

2 — Invest in people and leadership across the whole scientific career arc.

Build coherent pipelines – from school programmes and student mobility to flexible fellowships and leadership training for early-career researchers – so that talent, not background or timing, determines who can contribute and lead.

3 — Make collaboration the default funding model.

Design calls that actively reward shared leadership, tandems and international, cross-disciplinary teams, and keep processes flexible enough to accommodate bottom-up collectives rather than only single-principal-investigator projects.

4 — Embed society, communication and social sciences into core research funding.

Treat public engagement, ethics, social science partnerships and community collaboration as fundable essentials, providing dedicated resources and expert partners so that scientists can build trustful, two-way relationships instead of one-off outreach.

WILHELM UND ELSE
HERAEUS-STIFTUNG



PANELLISTS

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Chief Scientific Officer, Villum Foundation

Rolf-Dieter Heuer

Former Director General, CERN

Brooke Smith

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5 — Take more intellectual risk and accept visible failure.

Judge philanthropic portfolios by their highest-impact successes, not by an absence of failed bets, and send a clear signal to grantees and programme officers that ambitious, uncertain ideas are not only allowed but expected.

This event is supported by Wilhelm and Else Heraeus Foundation and assembled in the framework of the Falling Walls Science Summit 2025 in Berlin. The Falling Walls Science Summit is a leading international, interdisciplinary, and intersectoral forum for scientific breakthroughs. It commemorates the fall of the Berlin Wall and aims to promote dialogue between science and society.

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