

Excellence Initiative and Excellence Strategy

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Objectives and structure of the Excellence Initiative

The aim of the Excellence Initiative is to make top performers in the university and science field more visible and to improve the overall quality level of German academia and research.³⁰ The Federal-Länder agreement on the first funding period of the Excellence Initiative was concluded in 2005 for the period from 2006 to 2011 and includes a budget of 1.9 billion euros.³¹ The second Excellence agreement was signed in 2009 for the period from 2011 to 2017.³² The agreement provided for a budget of 2.7 billion euros. Support is granted on the basis of three funding lines: graduate schools, clusters of excellence, and institutional strategies:

- The graduate schools support young scientists and academics and aim to create optimum conditions for doctoral research within a broad scientific field.³³ At the same time, they are supposed to help develop leading, internationally competitive, and excellent scientific locations in Germany and to raise their profile.
- The aim of clusters of excellence is to establish internationally visible and competitive research and educational institutions at German university locations and to promote scientific networking and cooperation.³⁴ The aim is to sharpen the profile of the universities and create excellent research and career conditions for young scientists.
- Institutional strategies aim to expand top-level university research in a project-based manner in Germany and to make it more internationally competitive.³⁵ The funding aims to strengthen universities in their entirety as institutions and establish them in the top group of international competition. The prerequisite for funding an institutional strategy was the simultaneous funding of at least one cluster of excellence or

DFG research center and at least one graduate school.³⁶

The DFG and the German Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat) were charged with the implementation of the science-driven selection and evaluation procedure.

Impacts of the Excellence Initiative

As shown by the current ‘University Barometer’ of the Donors’ Association for German Science (Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft), most university managements give the Excellence Initiative a positive assessment.³⁷ Approval is 100 percent among the managements of supported universities, and 82 percent among those universities that are not supported. Almost two thirds of managements at universities of applied sciences share this positive assessment.

According to a bibliometric study published by the Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Sciences (Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften), 25.9 percent of the Cluster of Excellence publications from 2008 to 2011 belonged to the group of publications in the top decile of the citation distribution³⁸ – the percentage for universities as a whole was 14.3 percent.³⁹ Both the authors of this study and the International Commission of Experts on the Excellence Initiative (IEKE), which was set up to evaluate the Excellence Initiative, point out that on the basis of the data, it is impossible to say whether the new university research priorities have evolved or whether existing research capacity has only been made visible by bundling.⁴⁰ The IEKE sums up as follows: “Although it cannot be proved that the German university system has become more differentiated as a result of the Excellence Initiative, at least the ‘all-are-equal’ illusion has been buried

in the course of the public discussion.⁷⁴¹ Moreover, the IEKE comes to the conclusion that the Excellence Initiative has driven the internationalization of German research forward.⁴²

Excellence Strategy

Already in December 2014, the Federal and Länder Governments passed a fundamental decision to adopt a follow-up program to the Excellence Initiative, which expires in 2017.⁴³ After the IEKE submitted its evaluation of the Excellence Initiative in January 2016, the Joint Science Conference (Gemeinsame Wissenschaftskonferenz, GWK) drafted an agreement between the Federal and Länder Governments for an ‘Excellence Strategy’ in April 2016, which was adopted in a modified form by the Federal and Länder Governments in June 2016.⁴⁴ The Federal and Länder Governments intend to “maintain and build on the new dynamism within the German science system generated by the Excellence Initiative, and to provide longer-term prospects for successful Excellence Initiative projects. A further aim is to strengthen the universities by supporting the enhancement of their subject-specific and strategic profiles, which can relate to all performance areas.”⁴⁵ 533 million euros per year will be made available for this purpose.⁴⁶

The current Excellence Initiative has been extended by two years, i.e., the ongoing projects will receive transitional funding for a maximum of 24 months. A total of approximately 734 million euros will be made available for the period from 2017 to 2019.⁴⁷

As recommended by the IEKE,⁴⁸ graduate schools will no longer be continued as a separate funding line in the Excellence Strategy. The other two funding lines are to be further developed:⁴⁹

- The Cluster of Excellence funding line is designed to support project-based funding in internationally competitive research fields at universities or university consortia. The funding lasts for twice seven years. To strengthen governance and strategic orientation, universities with a Cluster of Excellence can apply for a university allowance.⁵⁰
- The second funding line – the Universities of Excellence – aims to strengthen universities or university consortia as institutions in the long term and to further develop their leading international role in research on the basis of successful Clusters of Excellence. Funding is subject to

the approval of two Clusters of Excellence at a university, or three in the case of a university consortium. Eleven universities of excellence and university consortia will be funded in the first call for proposals. They will be evaluated after seven years. New calls will be issued to fill any position that becomes vacant; four new universities will definitely be included.

The procedure for the Cluster of Excellence funding line is conducted by the DFG, for the Universities of Excellence by the German Council of Science and Humanities.

The Commission of Experts welcomes the decision in favor of a follow-up program for the Excellence Initiative with no time limit. The possibilities opened up by the new Article 91b of the Basic Law have been put to good use. The Commission of Experts agrees with the goal of both funding lines – institutional funding for the best-performing universities and support for outstanding research structures.

In its 2016 Report, the Commission of Experts suggested that the term ‘excellence’ should be defined more precisely in future. In its view, a University of Excellence must not only conduct outstanding research, but also make a successful contribution to knowledge and technology transfer.⁵¹ This recommendation has been partly met in the Excellence Strategy. Measures relating to the transfer of ideas and knowledge, and measures in the field of research-based teaching and research infrastructures, can be funded in both funding lines of the Excellence Strategy if they support the objective of top-level research.⁵²

The Commission of Experts fully agrees with the idea of selecting the institutions to be funded in a science-driven competition procedure, and with reducing the workload associated with the application in relation to the duration of funding.