

Resolution by the
18th General Meeting of the
German Rectors' Conference
(HRK)
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in Kaiserslautern

**On Continuing
the Excellence Initiative**

HRK German Rectors' Conference

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I. Initial situation

1. Under the Excellence Agreements of 2005 and 2009, the federal government and federal states launched the Excellence Initiative funding instrument in 2006 with its three funding schemes for “graduate schools”, “clusters of excellence” and “institutional strategies” and will continue it until 2017. On average, funds of €385 million per year are available for this initiative, 75% of which is supplied by the federal government. The annual funding represents 1.4% of public spending on higher education institutions (figures for 2014). 99 projects at 44 universities are currently being funded. Since 2012, 29 projects – 12 graduate schools, 12 clusters of excellence and five institutional strategies – have received funding for the first time.
2. The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation), which supervises the funding programme, and the Wissenschaftsrat (German Council of Science and Humanities), which was responsible for evaluating the institutional strategies, will submit a report on implementing the Excellence Initiative in summer 2015. An independent International Expert Commission appointed by the Gemeinsame Wissenschaftskonferenz (GWK, Joint Science Conference) and chaired by Prof. Dieter Imboden (ETH Zurich) will evaluate the funding instrument and its impact on the German research system by the end of 2015. In December 2014, the heads of the state governments and of the federal government deemed that the Excellence Initiative “very successfully brought a new dynamic into the German research system”. By utilising the new scope for action offered by the constitution, they are therefore striving to “continue to provide as a minimum the current amount of funding to support excellent top-level research in higher education institutions”. With this in mind, in April 2015 the governing parties in the German Bundestag came to an agreement that the Excellence Initiative should be extended by ten years and receive an annual minimum investment of €400 million.
3. In the past, the German Rectors' Conference has often emphasised that this focussed programme offered by the federal government and the federal states stimulated a dynamic spiral of academic performance using a relatively small amount of funds and that this has also attracted attention from outside of Germany. German universities have greatly increased their international visibility and competitiveness, honed their institutional profiles, advanced their differentiation processes, increased their research productivity, established or expanded their

cooperation with non-university partners and, last but not least, recruited highly qualified staff.

The wide acceptance in the research system of the initiative as an instrument for encouraging top-level research is also due to the global recognition and outstanding reputation of the reviewers.

The international nature of the evaluation is an important feature of the Excellence Initiative.

II. Recommendations

The HRK emphatically argues the case for the long-term continuation of the Excellence Initiative on a competitive basis in order to safeguard the successes that have already been achieved and to keep in motion the spiral of academic performance which is necessary to maintain Germany's competitive edge.

The HRK would like to thank the heads of the federal government and of the state governments for their willingness to continue funding "excellent top-level research" with the current level of financial resources as a minimum going forward in accordance with Article 91 of the Basic Law as amended in December 2014. It also strongly welcomes the earmarking of budgetary resources for this research funding by the governing parties in the German Bundestag.

The HRK recommends that the following basic principles are implemented when developing the successor programme:

1. Aim and purpose

The purpose of the long-term funding concept, in accordance with the highest international standards, is to strengthen top-level research in the universities to maintain its international competitiveness – this research being the product of an autonomous, bottom-up approach. In particular, the programme will enable the universities to hire the most highly qualified researchers from Germany and abroad. The competitive programme supports the universities in their function as regional research centres. It reinforces their role in the research system and promotes cooperation between universities and all other types of higher education institutions, non-university research institutions and companies. A funding proposal is only approved on the basis of scientific excellence. Along with advancing excellent research, the measures also aim for the promotion of framework conditions for research which take account of institutional governance, research-based teaching, career paths for early career researchers and the transfer of knowledge, thereby respecting gender equality.

2. Funding measures

The successful process of developing distinct institutional profiles is supported by three types of competitive research funding measures. The three funding measures each enable a considerable financial spectrum. There is no systematic hierarchy between them; they are considered to have equal value and can be combined.

a) *Broad-based and thematically defined key research areas*

The current 'clusters of excellence' have been a great success in that they have stimulated internationally visible cooperation between an ample number of excellently qualified staff in specific regions. However, in order to bring the best cooperation partners together to work on profile-defining research topics, it is often advisable that work is shared with partners without a specific association with the region; these partners might be higher education institutions, non-university research institutions or private companies.

Further funding for the clusters of excellence as the core of the successor programme therefore enables greater flexibility in organising the cluster, so that it is arranged as a focussed centre or perhaps as a contractually regulated regional or supra-regional alliance. It is invariably crucial for this process that very careful coordination ensures excellent progress in the research at each individual institution at all times, and that the thematic profile of each institution is enhanced.

The set up and operation of major key research areas involve, in particular, interdisciplinary approaches to research. In line with the HRK's 'Guidelines', the proposals also make substantial statements about the personal development of the postdoctoral candidates involved (phase II).

b) *Institutional funding*

Achievements which are characteristic of a university's research profile and the capability of a university to cooperate on research with external partners are only attained if there are targeted strategies and suitable organisational and governance structures in place at the institution. These strategies and structures usually relate to the university as a single research institution but may also relate to universities as centres of institutional alliances that include non-university partners and other higher education institutions. Forming regional alliances of research institutions may increase the efficiency of the research system and further improve the international visibility of the German research landscape.

The precisely conceived optimisation of the relevant institutional structures has a major influence on the achievable research performance so that the relevant projects directly exemplify research funding at the highest level.

c) Training of early career researchers

Doctoral candidates and young post-doctoral candidates (in accordance with phase I of the HRK's Guidelines) advance research through their own work and then make their technical and methodical skills available to serve the community, perhaps by continuing to use them in the immediate academic environment.

Therefore, it makes sense on a thematic as well as on a strategic level to support early career researchers in their fields of study and to support their development on an organisational level through a version of the funding instrument 'graduate school'. Cooperative doctoral degree programmes with universities of applied sciences are also envisaged here.

3. Organisation and procedure

The success of the current joint initiative of the federal government and the federal states means that two issues need to be emphasised as vital when it comes to the organisation and procedure:

a) Approval based on scientific excellence

The funding is awarded in an open and long-term competition. It is overseen by the DFG and supported by the German Council of Science and Humanities in an advisory role. The competition is based on a purely research-driven procedure with one mandatory criterion: scientific excellence.

The involvement of the most highly qualified reviewers in the world is vital. However, the involvement of this international group of people can only be successfully achieved if other non-scientific criteria are excluded (e.g. requirements by governments concerning regional concentration or distribution).

b) Moderate modifications

The rules of the procedure will only ever be modified on a gradual basis subject to appropriate evaluations. The continuity of the procedure is necessary so that new proposals can be linked in a useful, practical way to previous projects. This is particularly important for the 29 projects that first received funding in 2012 and that have now been awarded the option to apply for a continuation

of funding in accordance with the Joint Science Conference's resolution (cf. I.2.). The same excellence criteria that apply to applicant universities continue to apply to all partners and/or recipients of project funding. However, in order to take account of the level of differentiation within as well as between institutions at any one time and to be able to react to proposal requirements faster than was previously possible, it would be advisable for the cycle of approval rounds to be shortened from the current five (and in some cases six) years, regardless of the time frames required by the proposals' contents (five years or more).

In any event, it must remain guaranteed that the evaluation will be undertaken in several stages: The results from the subject-specific (and/or interdisciplinary) review panels are discussed in a comparative evaluation round. Here the peer reviewers will decide which projects with which specifications will be submitted to the grants committee for a final decision. The grants committee comprises representatives of the federal and the state governments, but the majority of the members of this committee are representatives from the world of science.