

04 March 2026

DFG, HRK and WR Propose Nexus – a New Funding Instrument for Networks of Excellence at EU Level

Funding aims to bring together Europe's distributed excellence and ensure greater visibility in global competition

How can European research be made more competitive globally? To address this question, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation), the German Rectors' Conference (HRK, Hochschulrektorenkonferenz) and the German Science and Humanities Council (Wissenschaftsrat, WR) presented a discussion paper entitled **Nexus – Networking excellence – Enabling participation – Transforming European Science** in Brussels on 3 March. In it, they propose strengthening the connection between hubs of research excellence within the European Research Area. Nexus is intended to complement existing funding instruments by intensifying institutionalised cooperation between Europe's leading universities and research institutions. The idea was inspired by the Draghi report on European competitiveness, authored by the former President of the European Central Bank in 2024. The report outlines a highly competitive instrument for institutions with a strong research profile, i.e. an "ERC for institutions" – a reference to the European Research Council (ERC).

The DFG, HRK and WR propose that Nexus should fund networks of excellence consisting of at least three universities or research institutions from different countries. The networks would conduct research on a jointly selected topic that is of strategic importance to the participating institutions. The guiding principles should be a science-led selection process, a focus on excellence, openness to all disciplines and topics, and integration into strategic processes at the universities and research institutions. From the perspective of the DFG, HRK and WR, the ERC would be the ideal place through which to implement Nexus in line with these principles. If Nexus were to be implemented elsewhere within the Framework Programme, it would be essential to adhere to these principles.

Nexus grants would provide funding for each network with €20 million per year over a period of seven years. If established within the ERC, 20 networks could be funded in a pilot phase. This would require additional funding to be made available under the new EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (FP10, 2028–2034: €2.8 billion) in addition to the planned ERC budget. After the pilot phase, the implementation and impact of Nexus should be evaluated in order to decide on its continuation.

"Our concept aims to connect Europe's distributed excellence more systematically than before and based on research topics chosen by the researchers themselves, leveraging synergies among Europe's universities and research institutions. This will enable cutting-edge research in Europe to

achieve the critical mass needed for future scientific breakthroughs. In this way, Nexus will not only be able to overcome fragmentation within the European Research Area, but also strengthen the resilience of Europe's research and innovation landscape and further enhance Europe's international visibility as a globally competitive region for research and innovation," said **DFG President Professor Dr. Katja Becker** at the presentation of the concept in Brussels.

HRK President Professor Dr. Walter Rosenthal commented on the joint proposal: "By establishing thematically focused networks that bring together leading actors from universities and research institutions and by providing them with strategic support, Nexus would increase the international visibility of Europe's cutting-edge research. This will require streamlined application procedures, openness to all topics and the entire spectrum of European cutting-edge research – from knowledge-driven to application-oriented research. In this way, Nexus could strengthen Europe's scientific performance and provide positive impetus for European society."

Professor Dr. Wolfgang Wick, Chair of the German Science and Humanities Council (WR), added: "Competition for ideas, talent and resources is increasing rapidly, so Europe should set new priorities in the short term. Alongside existing instruments with predefined topics, there needs to be more competitive funding that is open to all topics. Germany's Excellence Strategy demonstrates that a lot can be achieved when topics are not predetermined, but where strong emphasis is placed on creativity and bottom-up cooperation in research. The aim of Nexus is to help universities and research institutions connect cutting-edge research across national borders in a way that is sustainably competitive."

The joint proposal for the Nexus funding instrument builds on the experiences gained by the DFG, HRK and WR from German Excellence Initiative and Excellence Strategy: these have shown that initiatives to promote cooperative excellence can significantly strengthen the international competitiveness and visibility of universities and other research institutions. Nexus does not simply transfer the German model to the EU level, however, but tailors the proposed networks of excellence specifically to European needs.

Further Information

The Nexus concept is available for download here:

www.dfg.de/resource/blob/389814/dfg-hrk-wr-proposal-nexus.pdf

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