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HRK General Meeting comments on successor programme to the Excellence Initiative: right basic decisions, but need for change to process

At its General Meeting in Berlin yesterday, the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) called for improvements to plans for a "federal/state initiative for the funding of top-level university research" as a successor programme to the Excellence Initiative.

The HRK welcomed the fact that the concept presented by the Joint Science Conference (GWK) on 22 April concentrates on the funding of clusters and consistently emphasises a science-led award process. The General Meeting also expressly approved the possibility of obtaining a university allowance with a successful cluster proposal and thus strengthening the university as a whole.

"These are the right basic decisions," said HRK President Prof. Dr. Horst Hippler. "It's now all the more important to ensure that the rest of the framework is designed to achieve the desired effect, namely the identification and support of university-based research with the greatest potential, to an optimum degree."

With respect to the plans unveiled so far for the ongoing funding of top-level research, the HRK is particularly critical of the access requirements for the funding line of "Universities of Excellence" and the time planning.

The HRK believes that making access to the second funding line dependent on the proposal of at least two clusters of excellence does not adequately reflect the diversity of the German university landscape, and that smaller universities would be placed at a disadvantage. The fact that research alliances and smaller clusters will also be eligible for funding does not, in the HRK's view, balance out this effect. In any event, it is necessary to offer more flexibility in terms of the number of funded clusters, with "around 50" funding awards.

In this context, the General Meeting also called for clarification of the rules relating to the awarding and crediting of clusters in the case of research alliances. It concluded that there is a need for transparency in this respect to prevent unfair situations from arising from the first.

For the purposes of time planning, the HRK is calling for a solution that enables a workable process of review, evaluation and decision-making and gives universities adequate time to prepare for proposal submission and implementation. One possibility might be a regular cycle with submissions in April, award decisions in November and the commencement of funding at the start of the year.