

**24 January 2018****HRK in Brussels: European Excellence Initiative – European Universities**

Do we need a European Excellence Initiative for universities, especially in the economically weaker member states of the EU? What is the vision for the twenty 'European Universities' recently proposed by European heads of government? These questions were discussed at an EU strategy day for university leaders organised by the German Rectors' Conference (HRK), in a public debate with political and academic experts.

The representatives of German universities generally welcomed the interest of EU heads of government and the European Commission in creating strong university networks with the title 'European Universities'. They expressed the view that universities, researchers and students would all benefit from such a strategic partnership.

Following the conference, HRK President Dr Horst Hippler said: "The university representatives expressed the unanimous view to the EU Commission that a European Universities concept must relate not to education alone but to the complete knowledge triangle of education, research and innovation." He added that close cooperation between member states – represented in Germany by the federal government and federal states – and the Commission was necessary to promote successful strategic networking between universities in a bottom-up process. "It will take time to design this process effectively," Hippler said. "The universities will contribute their share to making it a success. To achieve this, they must be more actively involved in the political process of developing the concept."

The HRK is also stimulating discussion on this issue. At a public panel discussion with 150 participants, the HRK President said: "The German Rectors' Conference and its Polish partner organisation KRASP have published a paper proposing an Excellence Initiative for universities in the EU member states. Today a great deal of support was expressed for the concept."

The essential aspects of the concept are that each member country would choose whether or not to participate and then fund the initiative primarily from national funds and money from the EU structural funds. Quality measurement and funding recommendations could appropriately be handled by independent European funding organisations with funds from the excellence-focused EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. This would allow states with a lower-performing innovation landscape, in particular, to objectively assess the strengths and weaknesses of their national research systems and thus achieve more focused development and become more internationally competitive.