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Nexus

Networking excellence – Enabling participation – Transforming European science

Discussion paper by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation), the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) and the German Science and Humanities Council (WR)

A new instrument for cooperation between hubs of research excellence at European universities and their partners

The European Research Area is characterised by great diversity and the broad distribution of research excellence across its universities and their partners. Connecting hubs of distributed research excellence across borders would have a transformative impact: it would raise European excellence to a new level by bringing together single institutions that excel in one common research theme and establishing a network that pools expertise and infrastructure in Europe. This would create attractive scientific environments for global talent, thereby strengthening Europe's worldwide reputation, competitiveness and resilience.

A new funding instrument – Nexus – could be established to systematically connect hubs of research excellence involving European universities and their partners, fostering European research collaboration at the institutional level. The aim should be to further enhance these hubs of distributed research excellence through cooperative structures. In this way, they could achieve critical mass to jointly generate new knowledge by addressing visionary scientific questions that contribute to tackling pressing societal challenges, thereby unlocking fresh momentum for successful, responsible and sustainable innovation in collaboration with practitioners.

Nexus should be embedded in key strategic processes at universities and research organisations. In this way, it would enhance the long-term strategic performance of these institutions, overcome the fragmentation of the European Research Area and further strengthen Europe as a globally competitive region in science and innovation. Many universities are already well positioned for such an instrument due to their strategic profiles and their experience with institutional networking. In some countries, the instrument could provide a powerful stimulus to strengthen universities as training grounds for future excellent researchers and as attractive anchor institutions for interconnected research systems.

Closing a gap in European research funding

European research funding lacks an instrument for connecting thematic hubs of research excellence at universities and their partners to create a European nexus by fostering cooperation among them across national borders. This is why Mario Draghi has proposed the idea of an “ERC for Institutions”: this could be implemented through Nexus. Germany's Excellence Initiative and Strategy are examples of how cooperative excellence initiatives can significantly strengthen the international competitiveness and visibility of universities and other research organisations.

Nexus would go well beyond connecting individual excellent researchers – as in the case of the ERC Synergy Grants – by involving several institutions in the strategic development of excellence hubs. In addition, Nexus could enable those university alliances in Europe that share a common strategic research area to expand their research cooperation under established criteria of excellence.

Guiding principles

- 1. Striving for excellence:** The aim of Nexus is to promote competitive, peer-reviewed, cutting-edge research which must meet international standards based solely on scientific criteria.
- 2. Ensuring a broad scope of research:** The competition covers all research disciplines and spans the entire spectrum from knowledge-driven to application-oriented research. Research topics should be science-driven and chosen by the researchers themselves. Visionary and high-risk, high-gain research is explicitly welcomed.
- 3. Strengthening universities and their partners:** Participation should be open to both universities and research organisations as full members. As incubators of emerging research talent and magnets for international scholars, universities ought to be an integral part of Nexus. Companies are invited to participate as associated members, contributing as excellent research partners alongside the participating universities and research organisations.
- 4. Mobilising Europe's distributed excellence to create a system of "networked excellence":** Nexus applications should involve at least three partners, ideally from three different EU Member States and associated states. These institutions must conduct excellent research on a joint topic that is of strategic importance to the participating institutions. Applications must be submitted jointly. Nexus grants should be embedded in attractive scientific environments, draw top researchers world-wide and promote talent mobility.
- 5. Enabling long-term and strategic transformation:** Funding should be provided on a long-term basis and at levels significantly above the funding available for the existing ERC Synergy Grants or the former FET Open format. Nexus should generate prestige and visibility in research and innovation and have a strategic impact for the participating institutions. Application and approval procedures should be streamlined and efficient. The maximum amount of funding per Nexus must be weighed against sufficiently broad participation so as to ensure an approval rate of 15%.
- 6. Complementing the ERC's individual grants:** Nexus should not aim to replace existing instruments – particularly the highly effective individual funding provided by the ERC – but serve as a complementary and transformative addition that combines the strengths of individual research accomplishments with strategic institutional and cross-border cooperation.

A possible way forward

The ERC would be the ideal place through which to implement Nexus in line with the principles above, but it would need the necessary political support and additional, adequate resources to administer the instrument properly. If Nexus were to be implemented elsewhere within the Framework Programme, it would be essential to adhere to these principles, i.e. enable the best thematic champions to come together and develop their concepts bottom-up while ensuring that research excellence remains the decisive selection criterion.

In an initial pilot phase, 20 Nexus grants could be funded with €20 million each per year over a period of seven years. Additional funding should be earmarked for the pilot under the new Framework Programme (2028–2034: €2.8 billion). After the pilot phase, the implementation and impact of Nexus should be evaluated in order to decide on its continuation.

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