

Joint press release by DFG and WR

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Start of the Second Phase of the Excellence Strategy: DFG Announces Clusters of Excellence Funding Line

Multi-stage competition with funding decisions in May 2025 / “The level of interest and potential at the universities is very high” / Significant budget increase means funding is now available for up to 70 clusters

The go-ahead has been given for the second competition phase of the Excellence Strategy. Run by the federal and state governments to further strengthen top-level research at universities in Germany, the programme consists of two funding lines. The Clusters of Excellence funding line, implemented by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation), finances internationally outstanding research projects at universities or university consortia for up to two periods of seven years. Under the funding line Universities of Excellence, for which the German Science and Humanities Council (Wissenschaftsrat, WR) is responsible, universities and university consortia receive permanent funding as entire institutions in order to build on their leading international status in research.

The DFG announced the second phase of the Clusters of Excellence funding line on Thursday, 15 December 2022. On the same day, the DFG organised a digital event to provide detailed information about the competition under this funding line: it was attended by several hundred interested parties from the universities eligible to submit proposals, as well as by other representatives of the research system and research policy.

“The level of interest and potential at the universities is very high”

Commenting on the announcement of this call for proposals, President of the DFG, Professor Dr. Katja Becker, and the Chair of the WR, Professor Dr. Dorothea Wagner said: “Like the Excellence Initiative before it, the Excellence Strategy is a success story. In its first phase, it already noticeably increased the international competitiveness of top-level research at German universities, raising the worldwide visibility of Germany as a centre for science and research. And everything augurs very well for this new phase: by expanding the programme and increasing the budget available, the federal and state governments have sent out a powerful signal indicating the great importance attached to research and its funding that cannot be appreciated highly enough, especially in view of current global challenges. What is more, the level of interest and potential at the universities is very high. As such, the DFG and WR look forward to the upcoming competition with great excitement and optimism.”

Significant budget increase means funding is now available for up to 70 clusters

The competition has been significantly expanded for the second phase of the Clusters of Excellence programme and the budget increased compared to the first phase: according to a resolution passed by the Joint Science Conference (Gemeinsame Wissenschaftskonferenz - GWK) of the federal and state governments in November, up to 70 Clusters of Excellence are to be funded in future; the ongoing first round comprises 57. Earmarked funds have been increased by the federal and state governments from €385 million to €539 million per year.

The new call for proposals particularly highlights opportunities to establish collaborations between universities and across disciplinary boundaries: more than three universities can now jointly apply to form a Cluster of Excellence.

In addition, more time is available now than in the first competition phase for the review and decision-making process. This will also allow Clusters of Excellence review panels to enter into dialogue with applicants during the draft proposal phase.

If they are successful under the Clusters of Excellence funding line, universities and university consortia can receive permanent institutional funding under the Universities of Excellence funding line. The call for proposals for the latter will be issued in the first half of 2024; in order to meet the requirements here, universities must have at least two Clusters of Excellence each, or at least three Clusters of Excellence in the case of university consortia. In the case of Clusters of Excellence in which more than three universities are involved, the participating institutions are required to inform the WR in August 2024 which of them – subject to a maximum of three universities – are to have the joint Clusters of Excellence credited to them as a requirement under the Universities of Excellence funding line.

How the procedure works

The call for proposals that has now been issued marks the beginning of a multi-stage procedure under the Clusters of Excellence funding line:

for new proposals, universities and university consortia should first submit non-binding letters of intent to the DFG by February 2023 and draft proposals by the end of May 2023. These drafts are reviewed by international panels, primarily in order to review the excellence of the research and the researchers involved, as well as the quality of the supporting structures and the environment in which the projects are to be pursued. On this basis, in February 2024, the Committee of Experts for the Excellence Strategy made up of 39 internationally renowned academic experts from all disciplines will decide which drafts can be elaborated further into funding proposals and enter into competition with Clusters of Excellence already in receipt of funding.

In the case of currently ongoing Clusters of Excellence, the universities or university consortia involved are initially also required to submit a non-binding letter of intent on planned renewal proposals by the end of January 2024. In this case there is no draft proposal phase.

Funding proposals for new Clusters of Excellence and renewal proposals for Clusters of Excellence already in receipt of funding are to be submitted to the DFG by the end of August 2024. After these

have been reviewed by international panels, the Committee of Experts will initially deliberate again in May 2025 and put forward funding recommendations to the Excellence Commission for the Excellence Strategy. At this meeting, the members of the Committee of Experts and the federal and state ministers responsible for science and research make the final decision on future funding. Funding starts on 1 January 2026.

The second competitive phase of the Universities of Excellence funding line will start in 2024, when the WR will issue calls for new proposals; up to four additional universities or university consortia will be able to receive funding from January 2027. Universities of Excellence and the University Consortium of Excellence currently in receipt of funding will be evaluated at the end of 2025, and decisions on this evaluation are to be made in 2026. Details of the procedure for new proposals and the evaluation process will be announced by the WR at an information event in the first half of 2024.

Further information

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For the text of the call for proposals, see:

https://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/announcements_proposals/2022/info_wissenschaft_22_94/index.html

For more detailed information on the Excellence Strategy, see also:

https://www.dfg.de/excellence_strategy

www.wissenschaftsrat.de/excellence_strategy