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Excellence Strategy | Between Competition and Cooperation: Opportunities and Challenges of University Consortia

Report on the International Roundtable,
13 December 2022 | Online

In the "Universities of Excellence" funding line of the German "Excellence Strategy" funding programme, university consortia will also be funded for the first time since 2019, in addition to individual universities.

What makes such consortia successful? How do they manage the balancing act between cooperation and competition? What kind of challenges must be overcome?

At the invitation of the German Science and Humanities Council (Wissenschaftsrat, WR), international experts discussed the opportunities, challenges and conditions for success at the "University Consortia and the Funding of Excellence" roundtable.

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Introduction

Science and research depend on exchange and cooperation. Scientific institutions and researchers work together on multidimensional research questions, not least to take into account the increasing complexity of societal challenges. This happens both at the national and international level within the framework of individual and institutional forms of cooperation. However, science and research systems have also been characterised by competitive elements at both the organisational and individual level, so that cooperation and competition are essential components of every science and research system. The interweaving of these two "central dynamics of change", |¹ which is also described by the term "coopetition", |² is particularly evident in competitive funding programmes, such as the Excellence Strategy. In the Excellence Strategy, the federal and state governments since 2019 have for the first time been funding university consortia of up to three universities in addition to individual universities, with this long-term institutional funding line thus creating a new basis for sustainable cooperation between universities. New cooperative programmes and systems are also being initiated at the international level, especially at the European level.

The German Science and Humanities Council (WR, Wissenschaftsrat) invited international experts to a one-day event on 13 December 2022 to discuss the goals, opportunities and challenges of university consortia and the funding of excellence. The discussions consisted of three consecutive panels, with guiding questions including: What are the goals and purposes of institutional cooperation between universities? What are the challenges in implementing university consortia, especially with regard to joint governance and management structures? How can the success of university consortia be recognised and what indicators can be used to evaluate them appropriately? |³

This report summarises some of the central statements and key findings of the event, reflecting the opinions of the participants.

|¹ Cf. Kosmützky, A. (2021): Konkurrenz und Kooperation in der Wissenschaft: Traditionelle Muster und moderne Formen wissenschaftlicher Wissensproduktion, In: Unimagazin Leibniz Universität Hannover 3/4, p. 42–45.

|² Cf. Musselin, C. (2018): New forms of competition in higher education, in: Socio-Economic Review, 16 (3), p. 657–683, here p. 676.

|³ Cf. German Science and Humanities Council: International Roundtable | University Consortia and the Funding of Excellence. URL: https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/DE/Home/Buehne/_Inhalte/Inhalte_Online/ExStra_Roundtable_2022.html, last viewed 02 June 2023.

Motives and Opportunities of University Consortia

A joint application as a university consortium within the framework of a competitive funding programme, such as the Excellence Strategy, can generate creative potential for further institutional development of the involved institutions. The joint application and the common goal of forming a consortium can create an awareness of the individual strengths and weaknesses of the participating institutions while also contributing to the formation of a common identity. Through participation in the competition, common goals and potentialities can be identified, novel opportunities that present themselves can be shaped and implemented in view of the additional funding. These identification processes can also have an impact on the respective consortium partners and thus also promote the creation of innovative structures at the individual institutions involved. In particular, forward-oriented issues, such as digitalisation and diversity, can be jointly addressed and implemented across the board within university consortia.

In the Excellence Strategy, a university consortium can develop a lasting common supra-institutional identity without giving up the institutional identity of the individual universities involved. This distinguishes a consortium from a merger of institutions. Within the framework of excellence funding, a university consortium is made up of individual universities that demonstrate excellence through top-level research.

Although university consortia are usually formed for strategic reasons, **specific institutional and organisational motives also play a role**. In each case, universities weigh up the opportunities and risks to determine when institutional cooperation and when pursuing individual goals and competition between institutions promise added value for their own institution. The formation of university consortia should always be guided by scientific interests and generate clear scientific added value for the participating institutions. The partner institutions of a consortium should complement each other in their institutional profiles and strive for similar as well as common goals. The strategic goals of the member institutions should be in harmony with the strategic goals of the consortium – to the benefit of both the individual members and the consortium.

University consortia offer their partner institutions new opportunities by creating joint structures and critical mass for addressing scientific questions and institutional challenges that would be difficult for individual institutions to establish. Where the universities participating in a consortium aim to establish sustainable “enabling structures” and include several performance areas and further areas of activity, opportunities for synergies in a variety of areas can be created. In addition, there is the possibility that complementary institutional profiles are developed and that further added value is generated through the sharing of resources. This is especially true for regional consortia.

A university consortium can achieve greater visibility and attractiveness in all its performance areas and areas of activity, at the national and especially international levels. Due to its size and the combining of performance areas, a consortium can also be more attractive for students and researchers, e.g. by opening up cross-institutional study programmes and courses or the joint use of existing research infrastructures. In addition, participating institutions can access the international networks of their partners and thus enhance the international networking of all consortium partners. Furthermore, as a superordinate actor that combines the strengths and resources of its institutional partners and speaks with a common voice, university consortia can also emerge as a more attractive cooperation partner both for non-university research institutions and for renowned universities worldwide. Consortia can thereby also contribute to the further development of their respective regional science and research hub. University consortia also offer opportunities to coordinate recruitment efforts and personnel development of their participating institutions. Such coordination creates novel opportunities for reliable career paths for academic as well as administrative personnel, far exceeding the capabilities of a single university.

Conditions for Success and Challenges for University Consortia

A challenge is the complexity of collaborative governance structures, as a well-functioning governance structure is critical to the success of a consortium. In order to create appropriate collaborative governance, governance structures and related processes should be clearly defined, binding and appropriate to the situation. At the same time, they should be flexible and agile enough to adapt to unforeseen challenges and changing conditions. Joint consortium structures and processes should set the framework for cooperation in the various areas of collaboration, while also offering all participants the appropriate freedom in implementation. These arrangements should always consider and respect the rights of the individual institutions.

For collaborative structures to have a sustainable effect, the governance and management of the consortium must be functionally oriented and must be sustainable even in the case of personnel changes at the leadership level. All management levels and relevant actors should be involved in the cooperation between the participating institutions in order to make the **cooperation** long-term, sustainable and independent of personal interests. At the same time, personal relationships and individual commitment, especially at the leadership level, are of great importance for the success of university consortia. Mutual trust is critical for success. This kind of working relationship is strengthened through in-person meetings, in particular during the initiation of a joint collaborative project. The possibilities of digitalisation and virtual exchange should also be used, especially when it concerns the operational implementation of already established projects. Geographical proximity facilitates coordination between the partner institutions.

To be successful, university consortia require a high level of motivation of all participants as well as a strong identification with the consortium. This disposition must be maintained in the long term and should include all institutional levels – including non-scientific staff. To these ends, appropriate formats should be established for exchanging information on common goals and challenges, acceptance and the further development of the consortium.

University consortia also need binding agreements on the type of cooperation as well as mutual understanding of the organisational culture of the respective partner institutions. Occasion- and task-related communication and participation of all relevant actors are crucial in this context. The open exchange of internal best practices, e.g. in the areas of teaching and knowledge transfer, as well as scientific core processes, e.g. by sharing research results inter-institutionally at an early stage, is also central to the long-term success of institutional collaborations.

A particular challenge for university consortia lies in aligning the profiles of the individual institutions with the common, overarching identity and culture of the consortium. Although similar interests and approaches of the participating institutions favour the successful formation and implementation of a consortium, the outcome should not be homogenisation of the profiles of the consortium partners. To this end, it is crucial to find a balanced relationship between joint projects and the individual goals of the partner institutions. In this way, regional university consortia in particular can maintain their independence, while at the same time emphasising the added value of their cooperation. Further, the formation of university consortia should not lead to restricting cooperation and networking efforts with other national and international partner institutions.

In the case of university consortia, the inclusion of multiple performance areas – such as teaching, knowledge transfer, research infrastructures, internationalisation and personnel development – poses a challenge, as the degree of complexity of the decision-making processes required for this increases. Especially in light of different organisational cultures and strategic orientations as well as individual and already established administrative processes and routines, these must always be coordinated with each other. In addition, there is currently still a lack of best practice examples for consortium-wide cooperation in multiple performance areas, as the focus for the formation of university consortia is currently still mostly on common research interests and projects.

In order for university consortia to develop their full potential and impact, long-term funding and economic stability are necessary as the basis for lasting and sustained institutional cooperation. In particular, when expanding to cooperation in several performance areas and further areas of activity, the degree of complexity far exceeds selective cooperation in only one area. In this situation, a high degree of joint coordination and continuous participation is necessary, as well as long-term financing, so that the consortium can make full use of its potential. Especially for local and regional university consortia, the support of the respective state government, which has to create the necessary legal framework for the implementation, is of great importance. The seven-year funding periods with accompanying regular evaluations as a prerequisite for long-term funding distinguishes the funding line "Universities of Excellence" of

the Excellence Strategy from other international programmes with funding opportunities for university consortia. These either do not provide for regular evaluations (“IdEx” programme, France) or have shorter funding periods of currently four years (“European University Initiative”) or a maximum funding period of ten years (“World Premier International Research Center Initiative” [WPI], Japan), without the (current) possibility of long-term funding.

Evaluating University Consortia

In order to evaluate the success of university consortia, qualitative indicators in particular must be considered for an appropriate evaluation. The added value and synergy gains sought by university consortia cannot be assessed exclusively with quantitative indicators, especially since reliable quantitative parameters are not yet available for all performance areas and areas of activity of institutional collaborations. Also, with regard to the size, complexity and the individual configuration of each university consortium, an academically-driven evaluation based on qualitative evaluation methods aligned with the objectives of the consortium is more appropriate. However, quantitative indicators can be considered when properly contextualised. In this context, an expanded understanding of “excellence” should be taken as a basis, one that is not oriented towards purely quantitative indicators, but rather carries out institutional evaluations with a view to “networked” or “inclusive excellence”.

The evaluation should be based on on-site visits to the institutions to be evaluated. In the course of these visits, hearings should be held with persons outside the leadership level – in particular with the group of “early career researchers” – in order to obtain the broadest possible and most varied impression of the university consortium.

A central aspect of the evaluation of university consortia should include the assessment of the existing governance structures, factoring in the high complexity of the governance of consortia. |⁴ The evaluators should also possess specific multi- and transdisciplinary competences and experiences necessary for an appropriate evaluation of university consortia.

A systematic study of success factors for university consortia is still lacking. Open questions also include the future development of national science and research systems within the framework of global competition under geopolitical changes and the role of university consortia in this development. This also

|⁴ “In addition to the evaluation of the overall performance of the consortium, the governance of the cooperation itself should also be the subject of critical review” (translated). Cf. Stifterverband (2020): Future Lab: Kooperationsgovernance – Diskussionspapier 5: Wirkung messen: Die Evaluationsphase in Hochschulkoooperationen; Essen, p. 7–9.

pertains to the future design of excellence funding programmes at the European level, with a dual focus on the funding of excellent research as well as on regional policy considerations and “capacity-building” within the larger European science and research system.

The event took place virtually and brought together international higher education researchers, committee members of international excellence funding programmes, as well as representatives of the leadership level of universities and university consortia from European and non-European institutions. Moderated by international science journalists, over 100 participants attended the three panel discussions, representing a wide range of the German higher education system. |⁵ The event was part of the monitoring of the Excellence Strategy, in particular the funding line “Universities of Excellence”, which is carried out by the German Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat, WR). The insights gained from the event’s international perspective on university consortia and the funding of excellence represent an interim finding that will also find its way into the Committee of Experts’ report on the first funding phase. |⁶

|⁵ Among them were representatives from various German universities, including the currently funded “Universities of Excellence”, as well as from the federal and state ministries of science and research and the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG), the Committee of Experts of the Excellence Strategy and the Excellence Strategy Committee of the German Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat, WR).

|⁶ The Committee of Experts of the Excellence Strategy regularly submits a report to the Joint Science Conference (Gemeinsame Wissenschaftskonferenz, GWK), for the first time by 30 June 2027, on its observations of and experiences with the two funding lines of the Excellence Strategy. Cf. *Verwaltungsvereinbarung zwischen Bund und Ländern gemäß Artikel 9 1b Absatz 1 des Grundgesetzes zur Förderung von Spitzenforschung an Universitäten – „Exzellenzstrategie“* –, p. 6. URL: https://www.gwk-bonn.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/Dokumente/Papers/Verwaltungsvereinbarung_Exzellenzstrategie_2022.pdf, last viewed 25 May 2023.