

Joint Press Release by DFG and WR

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Setting the Course for the Excellence Strategy: 41 Draft Proposals Selected for the Next Round under the Clusters of Excellence Funding Line – Procedure Finalised for New Additions to the Universities of Excellence Funding Line

The projects selected by the Committee of Experts will compete with Clusters of Excellence already in receipt of funding / Proposals to be submitted by 22 August / Following the reviews, the Excellence Commission will decide on funding for seven years in May 2025 / For the Universities of Excellence funding line, the Committee of Experts approves call documents for the second competition phase / Excellence Commission confirms science-led procedure for potential new additions

The first decisions have been made in the second competition round of the Excellence Strategy, which is being pursued by the federal and state governments in order to further strengthen top-level research at universities in Germany. At its meeting in Bonn from 30 January to 1 February 2024, the international Committee of Experts appointed by the Joint Science Conference (GWK) at the recommendation of the DFG and the German Science and Humanities Council (Wissenschaftsrat, WR) selected a total of 41 draft proposals for submission as new Clusters of Excellence. ***[See the appendix to this press release for the complete list of the selected draft proposals and their universities or university consortia]*** The latter will therefore compete with the 57 Clusters of Excellence that have been in receipt of funding since 2019, each of which intends to submit a renewal proposal.

The 41 projects were selected from a total of 143 draft proposals submitted by 59 universities to the DFG up until the end of May last year; the DFG is organising the competition under the Cluster of Excellence funding line in accordance with the administrative agreement between the German federal and state governments. The draft proposals have undergone a review based on scientific quality criteria in the course of the past few months, carried out by a total of 21 international panels.

“We spent three days of intense discussion and decision-making at the very highest level,” said DFG President Professor Dr. Katja Becker at the end of the Committee of Experts meeting, which she chaired together with WR chair Professor Dr. Wolfgang Wick. With regard to the selection of the draft proposals, Becker further noted: “All in all, the drafts submitted reflected the enormous diversity of ideas and great achievement potential of German universities, as well as the exceptional appeal of

funding under the Excellence Strategy. Making a selection according to the most rigorous scientific quality criteria sometimes involved arriving at some close decisions.”

Becker concluded: “We firmly believe that the drafts now selected can enter into what will be extremely intriguing competition with the Clusters of Excellence that are already in receipt of funding. And we very much hope that a lot of the ideas that were not selected will be pursued in other ways, since they likewise offer huge potential.”

Selection of drafts: 37 universities successful, non-university partners virtually standard

The 41 selected draft proposals were submitted by 37 universities in 13 federal states; 13 of them were submitted by more than one university, with seven of these coming from a consortium comprising three universities.

Almost all draft proposals envisage the participation of a non-university partner. Most of the concepts were submitted by interdisciplinary consortia, with the humanities and social sciences being the most strongly represented in ten draft proposals, the life sciences in 15, the natural sciences in eight and the engineering sciences likewise in eight draft proposals.

The competition now continues with the selected draft proposals being developed into funding proposals by 22 August 2024 and submitted to the DFG once again. This deadline also applies to the renewal proposals to be submitted by the 57 Clusters of Excellence already being funded; these are not required to go through a draft proposal phase first. Subsequently, all new and renewal proposals will again be reviewed by international panels between October 2024 and February 2025. On this basis, the Excellence Commission will then decide on 22 May 2025 which projects are to receive funding; in addition to the members of the Committee of Experts, this Commission will also include the federal and state ministers responsible for science and research.

The successful Clusters of Excellence will receive funding for a period of seven years starting on 1 January 2026. After this, the newly established clusters can apply for a second funding period which, if they are successful, will secure them funding for an additional seven years.

Compared to the first phase of the Excellence Strategy, the competition among Clusters of Excellence has been significantly expanded for the second phase and the budget increased: according to a resolution passed by the GWK in November 2022, funding is potentially to be available for up to 70 Clusters of Excellence in future; there are 57 in the first round currently underway. Earmarked funds have been increased by the federal and state governments from €385 million to €539 million per year.

Universities of Excellence: procedure specified for new additions

In addition to selecting the draft proposals for new Clusters of Excellence, the Committee of Experts also consulted on the Universities of Excellence funding line under the Excellence Strategy, which is implemented by the WR. In order to receive funding as a University of Excellence or a University Consortium of Excellence, a university must have – in addition to a successful overall concept – at least

two approved Clusters of Excellence and a university consortium must have at least three approved Clusters of Excellence.

The second phase of the competition under the Universities of Excellence funding line is likewise due to commence, with the Committee of Experts now having approved the call documents. The latter will be published on the WR website on 28 March 2024 together with the updated evaluation guidelines for Universities of Excellence that are already in receipt of funding. The proposal submission procedure for funding as a University of Excellence or University Consortium of Excellence does not include a draft proposal phase.

The procedure for new additions has been specified for the next funding round. This matter was also addressed by the Excellence Commission at its gathering in Bonn. If Universities of Excellence that have already received funding do not reach the required number of Clusters of Excellence or are assessed negatively in the evaluation at the end of 2025, the vacant places can be filled. The Commission confirmed that funding decisions are made exclusively based on the science-led procedure.

“The Excellence Commission’s decision creates additional opportunities to participate in the Universities of Excellence funding line and reflects the Commission’s confidence in the excellence of the German research system,” said WR chair Wolfgang Wick.

Replacements will be made in connection with the already planned call for proposals for up to four new proposals.

Decisions under the Universities of Excellence funding line will again be taken by the Excellence Commission in September 2026, with funding starting on 1 January 2027.

Further information

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For the text of the call for proposals, see:

www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/announcements_proposals/2022/info_wissenschaft_22_94

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

https://www.dfg.de/excellence_strategy

www.wissenschaftsrat.de/excellence_strategy