

Excellence Strategy of the German Federal and State Governments: Call for Proposals in the Universities of Excellence Funding Line

(Funding period 1 January 2027 – 31 December 2033)

28 March 2024

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On 4 November 2022, Germany's federal and state governments renewed the "Administrative Agreement between the Federal and State Governments in Accordance with Article 91b Paragraph 1 of the Basic Law on the Funding of Top-Level Research at Universities – Excellence Strategy" and reiterated their commitment to promote scientific excellence, to continually advance university profile-building and to expand cooperation within the German system of research and higher education even further. The Excellence Strategy is designed to sustainably strengthen Germany's position as a research location, to further increase its international competitiveness and to continue the successful development aimed at building a research culture that supports top-level performance and quality across the board. The objective is to maintain the dynamic within the German research system achieved during the first funding period and to continue strengthening the universities by supporting their subject-related and strategic profile-building in a variety of performance areas.

The Universities of Excellence funding line aims at the long-term strengthening of institutions and the expansion of their international top-level research position based on successful Clusters of Excellence.

Funding will begin on 1 January 2027.

In December 2022, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) published a separate call for proposals for the Clusters of Excellence funding line.

A. Objectives and Characteristics of the Universities of Excellence Funding Line

The “Excellence Strategy” focuses on funding top-level research and therefore research as a performance area is given priority in the selection process. |¹ Therefore, in the Universities of Excellence funding line, the other performance areas as well as their interrelations are generally considered in terms of their role in the university’s institutional strategy for the expansion of top-level research. Applicants are required to demonstrate the plausibility of their chosen institutional strategy as an individual university or as a university consortium (regarding proposals for a University Excellence Consortium, the term “institutional strategy” refers to a supra-institutional strategy of the consortium as a whole). The funding line is, in principle, open towards different types of institutional strategies and kinds of cooperation.

Applicants are expected to present a long-term, sustainable institutional strategy helping to further position the institution or consortium in their regional, national and, in particular, international settings. Moreover, the universities must demonstrate the presence of effective structures and processes for governance and higher education management. Furthermore, applicants shall document the capacity of the individual university or the consortium for institutional renewal in light of the long-term nature of the funding. The institutional strategy is designed to strengthen the individual university or the consortium as an institution and enable them respectively to expand their international top-level research position, visibility, and interconnectedness in the long term. To this end, based on the status quo, prior achievements, and an analysis of strengths and weaknesses, the institutional strategy is supposed to set out defined objectives while taking the entire university or consortium into consideration.

Regarding the **status quo and prior achievements**, applicant universities are expected to demonstrate an existing overall profile, level of academic performance and starting condition(s) of very high quality for the expansion of their international leading position as well as a considerable degree of capacity for strategy development and action-taking. Moreover, they are expected to generate a nuanced analysis and evaluation of their performance and potential across all performance areas (research, teaching, transfer |² and research infrastructures) and their framework and environmental conditions to draw strategic and operational conclusions from.

| ¹ The understanding of „performance area“ applied here refers to the „Perspektiven des deutschen Wissenschaftssystems“ formulated by the Wissenschaftsrat (WR, German Science and Humanities Council). According to these perspectives, science and humanities include an entire spectrum of varying performance dimensions that are closely linked, partly constitutive for one another and mutually beneficial (p. 25). As well as research and teaching, based on this premise, transfer and research-infrastructure also rank among a university’s core tasks. See Wissenschaftsrat (2013): Perspektiven des deutschen Wissenschaftssystems; Cologne/Bielefeld. URL: <https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archiv/3228-13.html>, p. 8 and pp. 25f.

| ² In an academic sense, the subject matter of transfer is understood as specified academic and technological knowledge. Transfer as a university performance dimension, in a broader sense, covers the dialogical interaction between academic actors and partners outside academia

With respect to **future planning**, applicant universities are expected to generate effective measures leading to improved performance levels in research and develop further performance areas in accordance with their own set of objectives. All performance areas (research, teaching, transfer and research infrastructures) as well as supporting structures and processes may be incorporated into the planning process.

In a **University Excellence Consortium**, two or three universities associate that have already visibly been practising cooperation. Within such consortia, high-achieving partners shall come together based on academic considerations, each of whom already dispose of substantial research capabilities. A proposal must be submitted based on long-term shared objectives within a sustained institutional cooperation and must demonstrate that the institutional strategy will generate further synergies and create added value both for the consortium as a unit and for each participating individual institution. Cooperation between the consortium partners can be additive or complementary with regard to subject areas, areas of focus as well as to organisational structures.

B. Eligibility Requirements and Formal Funding Requirements

B.1 Eligibility requirements and participation of cooperation partners

Applicant universities

Universities or university consortia in Germany, represented by their heads, are eligible to submit proposals. A university may submit, given the necessary provisions are met (see below), only **one** proposal: either as an **individual university** or as an applicant in a **consortium of two or three universities**. In a consortium, participating universities jointly apply to promote excellent research within a cooperative structure. To this end, existing collaborations, synergies and the added academic and structural value relative to each university participating in the consortium must be clearly identifiable. Ongoing institutional strategic cooperation must be specified in a binding and explicit set of regulations in line with a joint governance structure. Proposals for a university consortium may also be submitted by universities in different federal states.

from society, culture, the private sector and politics, where academic and technological knowledge is transferred. See Wissenschaftsrat: Wissens- und Technologietransfer als Gegenstand institutioneller Strategien | Positionspapier; Weimar. URL: <https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archiv/5665-16.html>, pp. 5 and 8ff. as well as Wissenschaftsrat (2013): Perspektiven des deutschen Wissenschaftssystems; Cologne/Bielefeld. URL: <https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archiv/3228-13.html>, pp. 25f.

An applicant individual university or an applicant consortium is asked to present a strategic overall concept in relation to the institution or consortium (“institutional strategy”).

In a proposal submission for a University Excellence Consortium, the applicant universities name the university that will manage the funds awarded.

Cooperation partners

Applicant universities have the option to involve institutional and/or individual cooperation partners in the institutional strategy who do not have applicant status, e.g. other universities, universities of applied sciences, non-university research institutions, external researchers and also institutions from the private sector or other sectors of society (for information on use of funds see separate [guidelines](#)).

B.2 Formal Funding Requirements

Required number of Clusters of Excellence

The submission of a proposal as a University of Excellence by an individual applicant university requires the funding of at least two Clusters of Excellence at that university. The submission of a proposal as a University Excellence Consortium by two or three jointly applying universities requires funding of a total of at least three Clusters of Excellence at these universities. Each of the participating universities needs to either have at least one Cluster of Excellence or be participating as an applicant in a Cluster of Excellence.

Crediting joint Clusters of Excellence for individual universities and university consortia

When a Cluster of Excellence is supported by two or three applicant universities, this Cluster of Excellence may be credited to two or three universities as a prerequisite for the proposal to the Universities of Excellence funding line. If more than three universities submit a joint proposal for a Cluster of Excellence, they will determine to which up to three applicant universities the participation will be credited as funding requirement in the Universities of Excellence funding line. Participation in a Cluster of Excellence will thus be credited to a maximum of three applicant universities as funding requirement in the Universities of Excellence funding line.

In case of a proposal as a University Excellence Consortium, all Clusters of Excellence supported by the applicant universities or, in the case of a Cluster of Excellence supported by two or more applicant universities, supported jointly, will be considered in the verification of eligibility (to credit Clusters of Excellence supported by more than three applicant universities, the abovementioned regulation will apply).

C. Object of Funding

Funding extends to scientific and science-related activities of universities and their cooperation partners in cases of supra-regional significance.

Funding is offered for measures relevant for the institutional strategy which enable applicant institutions to sustainably develop and enhance their internationally outstanding areas as well as establish their position either as an individual institution or as a University Excellence Consortium in the top group within a competitive international environment.

Measures can support subject-based profiling and relate to the institutions in their entirety as well as to individual subject areas. Funding for individuals may also be integrated into the measures. It is also possible to propose measures relating to the performance areas of teaching, transfer and research-infrastructures, provided they are oriented towards supporting top-level research and contribute significantly to the institutional strategy. In this respect, proposals can be submitted for measures aimed at improving organisational development and the framework conditions for researchers at all career levels. These can address structures and processes pertaining to governance and administration as well as areas of activity such as supporting early career researchers (including early research independence), staff recruitment and development, equal opportunity and diversity, internationalisation as well as cooperation.

Provided they suit the institutional strategy, measures may include new approaches as well as integrate existing best practices and expand on them. The proposal shall plausibly state how the measures can be operationalised and are appropriate for achieving sustained improvements. These measures may be intended for short-term, medium-term or long-term implementation.

D. Funding Criteria

The institutional strategy will be evaluated exclusively based on scientific criteria. It considers both previous outstanding scientific and institutional achievements by international standards and the presented development prospects for the university. An analysis of strengths and weaknesses in all relevant performance areas is expected. The criteria mentioned in the [Administrative Agreement](#) and [those](#) adopted by the Committee of Experts apply.

During the review process, previous outstanding research achievements are evaluated based on, inter alia, parameters of scientific performance with transparent consideration of qualitative information and available quantitative data (e.g. publications, third-party funding, patents, awards).

Strategic objectives formulated in the proposal for a university allowance within the framework of the Clusters of Excellence funding line should be in line with those in the proposal for the Universities of Excellence funding line.

E. Procedure

The selection of eligible proposals is based on an academically driven and competitive procedure.

For all universities, proposals for the Universities of Excellence funding line are a one-stage process (no draft proposals), following the submission of a letter of intent. The respective proposal contains a strategic institution- or consortium-related overall concept and a rough funding plan for the funding period from 1 January 2027 to 31 December 2033, divided into annual instalments as well as into staff and direct project costs and investment costs.

Septennially, Universities of Excellence and University Excellence Consortia are subject to an independent and external evaluation of a selective nature, organised by the WR and evaluated by the Committee of Experts.

Letter of intent

For the purposes of planning on-site visits at the applicant institution(s) and bringing in reviewers, individual universities and university consortia planning to submit a proposal for the Universities of Excellence funding line are requested to submit a letter of intent. The letter of intent contains details regarding the university's or consortium's profile and the main subject- and content-related focus areas of the proposal. Following submission of the letter of intent, the intended proposal can no longer be changed from individual university to a university consortium or vice versa. A [template](#) for the letter of intent will be made available on 28 March 2024.

The letter of intent can only be processed if it has been forwarded to and endorsed by authorities responsible for science and research in the relevant federal states. **Cut-off deadline** for submitting the **letter of intent** is **27 June 2025**.

Proposal submission

The proposal must be sent to the WR head office and signed by the head of the university or, in the case of university consortia, the heads of the universities. The letter must be accompanied by a letter from the federal state ministry in charge expressing the support of the federal state for the proposal. In addition, the letter must contain a commitment to provide co-funding (25% of the requested funding) and confirmation that the proposed measures align with the federal state's higher education policy objectives and legal regulations. For **consortia composed of universities from**

several federal states, a **single** joint supporting letter from the research ministries in all participating federal states must be submitted.

Cut-off deadline for submitting the electronic version of the English version of the **proposal** is **12 November 2025**. The electronic version of the German version and the printed copies of both versions can be submitted up to and including **25 November 2025**. The electronic and printed versions must be identical.

Proposal requirements in the Universities of Excellence funding line

To create the proposal, the annotated [proposal template](#), which will be made available on 28 March 2024, must be used. Proposals must be submitted in German and English (see above), with the English version being definitive. The proposal consists of the following parts: (A) proposal text outlining the institutional strategy and presenting status quo and prior achievements as well as plans and potential, (B) funding plan, and (C) data annex, (D) glossary and list of abbreviations, and, in case of a proposal as a University Excellence Consortium, (E) binding regulations of the consortium.

Proposal evaluation and selection phase

There is a three-stage evaluation and selection procedure:

1. Individual proposal evaluation on-site: all proposals meeting the proposal requirements will be evaluated on-site during the approximate period of March to July 2026 by international groups of experts. On-site discussions will generally take place in English.
2. Comparative evaluation of all proposals by the Committee of Experts: Following the on-site visits, all proposals as well as the evaluation results generated on a case-by-case basis will be assessed comparatively and academically driven by the Committee of Experts in September 2026. Based on these assessments, the Committee of Experts develops funding recommendations and presents them to the Excellence Commission.
3. Funding decision by the Excellence Commission: In September 2026, based on the draft recommendations by the Committee of Experts, the Excellence Commission will deliberate and thereafter make the funding decisions.

The ministers responsible for research at the federal and state level will jointly announce the funding decisions.

F. Funding Period and Extent of Funding

The Universities of Excellence and University Excellence Consortia will receive **long-term** funding, provided they continue to meet the formal funding requirements and achieve a positive septennial

evaluation from the Committee of Experts. This independent and external evaluation procedure of a selective nature assesses, in particular, whether the requirements for joint funding pursuant to section 4, paragraphs 1 and 3 of the Administrative Agreement continue to be met. Further development and redesign of measures will be possible after the septennial evaluation, provided the measures continue to align with the objectives of the programme and the respective institutional strategy of the University of Excellence or the University Excellence Consortium.

The joint funding of Universities of Excellence and University Excellence Consortia by the federal government and host state |³ will be based on the funding and financing decisions made by the Excellence Commission. Applicants may request annual funding amounts – depending on the respective proposal – of between €10 and €15 million for proposals by individual universities and between €15 and €28 million for University Excellence Consortia proposals. Exact funding amounts are decided upon in the Excellence Commission based on the presented funding plan. In each round of funding, the Excellence Commission determines the amount of long-term funding per University of Excellence or University Excellence Consortium. Funds are made available within a flexible financial resource management framework for an initial seven-year period.

During the first funding period, the federal government and the federal states have provided a total of €148 million annually for eleven grants. In the second round with funding starting 1 January 2027, a total of €148 million will be made available annually for eleven grants, administrative costs and potential completion funding for departing Universities of Excellence. Additionally, for up to four grants surpassing eleven, up to €60 million will be made available annually. Acceptance of new grants, in any case, is subject to the condition of competitive success. Existing and new grants are treated equally with regard to the determination of funding amounts.

Given the long-term nature of the funding, programme allowances or university allowances will not be offered in the Universities of Excellence funding line. In case of funding within the Universities of Excellence funding line, the university allowance at this university is deemed satisfied and will cease 1 January 2027. For information on funds usage please refer to the separate [guidelines](#).

G. Further Information

The WR publishes the following documents in addition to this call for proposals:

1. Funding criteria for the Universities of Excellence funding line

| ³ With regard to University Excellence Consortia, the term “host state” always includes all host states.

2. Mustervorlage für die Absichtserklärung zur geplanten Antragstellung in der Förderlinie Exzellenzuniversitäten (Instructions on writing a letter of intent for a planned proposal for the Universities of Excellence funding line, available in German only)
3. Proposal templates with explanatory notes for the Universities of Excellence funding line
4. Timeline for the Excellence Strategy until 2027
5. Guidelines on use of funds

All documents are available on the [web page of the WR](#).

For further information about the programme, please visit:

Administrative Agreement between the Federal and State Governments in Accordance with Article 91b Paragraph 1 of the Basic Law on the Funding of Top-Level Research at Universities in the version dated 4 November 2022 (available in German only):

https://www.gwk-bonn.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/Dokumente/Papers/Verwaltungsvereinbarung_Exzellenzstrategie_2022.pdf

Web page of the Gemeinsame Wissenschaftskonferenz (GWK, Joint Science Conference) on the Excellence Strategy programme (available in German only):

<https://www.gwk-bonn.de/themen/foerderung-von-hochschulen/exzellenzstrategie-exzellenzinitiative>

Web page of the Wissenschaftsrat (WR, German Science and Humanities Council) on the Excellence Strategy programme:

https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/EN/Fields-of-Activity/Competitive_review_processes/Excellence-Strategy/excellence-strategy.html

Web page of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) on the Excellence Strategy programme:

<https://www.dfg.de/en/research-funding/funding-initiative/excellence-strategy>

Web page of the Excellence Strategy programme:

<https://www.exzellenzstrategie.de/en>

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https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/EN/Fields-of-Activity/Competitive_review_processes/Excellence-Strategy/Contact_persons/contact_persons_node.html