

30. September 2016

Germany's Excellence Strategy: Call for Proposals in the Universities of Excellence Funding Line (Funding period 1 November 2019 – 31 October 2026)

On 16 June 2016, Germany's federal and state governments adopted 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". The Excellence Strategy is designed to continue the advancement of German universities begun particularly through the Excellence Initiative by supporting research of the highest standard, enhancing research profiles and facilitating cooperation in the research system. The goal is to bolster Germany's position as a research location in the long term, further increase its international competitiveness and continue the successful development of a research culture that supports high performance and quality across the board. The intention is to maintain and build on the new dynamism generated by the Excellence Initiative within the German research system and to provide longer-term prospects for successful Excellence Initiative projects. This strengthening of the universities is also intended to support the enhancement of their research strategies and profiles, which may relate to all performance areas.

Object of funding

The Excellence Strategy consists of two funding lines, Clusters of Excellence and Universities of Excellence. Funding extends to all academic and science-related activities of nationwide relevance that are conducted by universities and their cooperation partners.

The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) will publish a call for the Clusters of Excellence funding line.

The purpose of the Universities of Excellence funding line is to strengthen either a university as single institution or a consortium of universities (University Excellence Consortium) in the long term on the basis of sustained, joint strategic objectives in a long-lasting collaboration and to develop its international leading position in research based on successful Clusters of Excellence. Funding can be provided for all measures relating to the strategic concept that enable the university or the university consortium to develop and expand its internationally outstanding areas in the long term and to establish itself as a single institution or a consortium within the international competitive environment of leading universities.

Universities in receipt of funding through an Institutional Strategy as part of the Excellence Agreement II may include the further development of currently funded measures in their proposals as long as they meet the funding requirements of the Excellence Strategy.

Funding will start on 1 November 2019.

Eligibility requirements

Universities and/or university consortia in Germany, represented by their institutional heads, are eligible to submit proposals.

Each university may submit one proposal, either as an individual university or as part of a consortium of two or three universities.

Applicants may involve cooperation partners such as other higher education institutions, non-university research institutions, or partners from industry and other sectors.

For the Universities of Excellence funding line, a proposal may be submitted jointly by a consortium of two or three universities as a University Excellence Consortium acting as a joint applicant in order to promote excellent research in a cooperative structure. Previous cooperation, synergies and scientific and structural added value must be clearly recognisable in relation to each applicant university within the consortium. The ongoing strategic cooperation between institutions must be defined in a binding set of regulations.

The submission of a proposal as a University of Excellence by an individual university requires the funding of at least two Clusters of Excellence at this university.

The submission of a proposal as a University Excellence Consortium by two or three jointly applying universities requires funding of at least three Clusters of Excellence at these universities; in this case, each university involved in the consortium needs to either host at least one Cluster of Excellence or participate in one Cluster of Excellence as an applicant.

In determining the eligibility requirements, all Clusters of Excellence hosted or co-hosted by the members of the University Excellence Consortium will be taken into account.

Funding criteria

Proposals will be evaluated solely on the basis of scientific criteria, taking into account both previous outstanding scientific and institutional achievements in accordance with international standards and the outlined development prospects as well as the university's self-concept. Proposals should

address the institution's strengths and weaknesses in all relevant performance areas. The criteria mentioned in the Administrative Agreement apply, in particular:

- Coherence and quality of a strategic institution-related overall concept as well as a development strategy relating to:
 - the development of the international leading position, visibility and networking
 - the further development of core areas in research and all accessory performance dimensions such as research-oriented teaching, research infrastructures and transfer
 - the support of early career researchers and their academic independence
 - the capacity for innovation and the long-term capacity for institutional renewal
 - the attraction of world-leading researchers through a joint (if appropriate) strategy of appointment and recruitment as well as staff development
 - the promotion of equal opportunity in academia
 - the governance of the university and, if applicable, between the participating partners
- Qualitative and structural added value and the sustainability of the proposed measures compared with the status quo

During the review process, previous outstanding research achievements are evaluated, inter alia, on the basis of the parameters of scientific performance with transparent consideration of available statistical data (e.g. third-party funding, research awards).

Proposals for University Excellence Consortia must also meet the following general criteria:

- Quality and strategic orientation of the general and visible cooperation practised to date
- Visibility of synergies and the academic and structural added value of the proposed measures for each applicant university and the consortium as a whole
- Strategic orientation and long-term sustainability of the consortium's governance

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

Further information on the review criteria can be found in the lists of criteria and the guidelines, which will be published by the Wissenschaftsrat (WR, German Council of Science and Humanities) in April 2017.

Procedure

The programme envisages an academically driven, competitive decision-making process.

For all universities, proposals for the Universities of Excellence funding line will be submitted in a one-stage process (no draft proposals) following the submission of a letter of intent. Proposals contain a strategic institution-related or consortium-related overall concept and a rough funding plan for the first funding period, divided into yearly amounts, and broken down into staffing and direct project costs and investment costs.

All submitted proposals which satisfy the proposal requirements will be evaluated during on-site visits. The comparative assessment of the evaluation results by the Committee of Experts will form the basis of its recommendations and the decisions by the Excellence Commission.

For the purposes of planning on-site visits and composing suitable review panels, applicants which intend to submit a proposal in the Universities of Excellence funding line are requested to submit a letter of intent with comments by February/March 2018. Letters of intent include details on the university profile and the key subject- and content-related aspects of the proposal. After a letter of intent has been submitted, it is not possible to change the intended proposal from an individual university to a university consortium. A university may later leave a consortium and submit a proposal as an individual university after the funding decision on Clusters of Excellence, provided that the proposal requirements are met.

Proposals for the Universities of Excellence funding line must be received by the WR Head Office by mid-December 2018.

Templates will be made available in April 2017 for letters of intent and in September 2017 for proposals.

Deadlines for the submission of the letters of intent and for proposals will be announced at a later time.

Please note that letters of intent and proposals can only be processed if they have been forwarded to and endorsed by the authority responsible for research in the relevant federal state.

The Excellence Commission will reach a decision on funding based on the recommendation of the Committee of Experts in July 2019. Funding decisions will be announced jointly by the ministers responsible for research at federal and state level. Funding will start on 1 November 2019.

Evaluation

Universities of Excellence and University Excellence Consortia will be subject to an independent and external evaluation of a selective nature every seven years. In particular, the evaluation will examine whether the requirements for joint funding by the federal and state governments are still satisfied.

Funding period and extent of funding

Universities of Excellence and University Excellence Consortia will receive long-term funding subject to the result of the evaluation and the fulfilment of the funding requirements. The joint funding of Universities of Excellence and University Excellence Consortia by the federal government and host states will be based on the funding plan approved by the Excellence Commission. Proposals by individual institutions may request funding amounts of between €10 million and €15 million per year; university consortia may request funding amounts of between €15 million and €28 million per year. Funds will be made available for an initial seven years within a flexible financial resource management framework and will be continued if the funding requirements are still fulfilled by the required minimum number of Clusters of Excellence and in the case of a successful evaluation.

For the first funding period (starting on 1 November 2019), the federal and state governments intend to provide a total of approximately €148 million for up to 11 grants that will be awarded based on the competitive process.

When a proposal is submitted for a University Excellence Consortium, the applicant universities must indicate which university will manage the awarded funds.

Due to the long-term nature of the funding, no university allowances or programme allowances will be offered in the Universities of Excellence funding line. Please note that institutions that receive funding in the Clusters of Excellence funding line and are additionally successful under the Universities of Excellence funding line may only receive the university allowance until 1 November 2019.

Bridge funding for existing projects funded through the Excellence Initiative

Graduate Schools, Clusters of Excellence and Institutional Strategies funded through the Excellence Initiative on the basis of the Excellence Agreement II may apply for bridge funding for a maximum of 24 months with funding to begin on 1 November 2017, up to an annual amount of the funds approved for the last 12 months of funding. Funding is subject to the provision of funds through the legislative entities and the corresponding allocation of funds to the DFG by the federal and state governments.

Proposals for bridge funding for existing grants under the Excellence Initiative must be received by the DFG's Head Office by the cut-off date of 1 November 2016. Please refer to the information on bridge funding (DFG form ExStra 101, available in German only).

Note that bridge funding is provided in lieu of completion funding as envisaged per section 6, paragraph 2 of the Excellence Agreement II. The federal and state governments plan to provide a total of €734 million for bridge funding for 2017 to 2019.

Further Information

In April 2017, the WR will publish the following supplementary documents for the Universities of Excellence funding line in addition to this call:

1. Guidelines for the Universities of Excellence funding line
2. Review criteria for the Universities of Excellence funding line
3. Instructions on writing letters of intent for the Universities of Excellence funding line

Proposal templates for the Universities of Excellence funding line will be published in autumn 2017.

For more information about the programme, 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 16 June 2016 (available in German only):

<https://www.bmbf.de/files/Verwaltungsvereinbarung-Exzellenzstrategie-2016.pdf>

Web page of the Joint Science Conference (GWK) on the Excellence Strategy programme (available in German only): <http://www.gwk-bonn.de/themen/wissenschaftspakte/exzellenzstrategie/>

Web page of the WR on the Excellence Strategy programme:

<https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/arbeitsbereiche-arbeitsprogramm/exzellenzstrategie>

Web page of the DFG on the Excellence Strategy programme:

http://www.dfg.de/excellence_strategy/

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