

Universities of Excellence Funding Line

Guidelines

General Notes

These guidelines contain information for universities and university consortia submitting proposals to the Universities of Excellence funding line. They are based on 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’*” of 16 June 2016. Other documents should also be consulted in addition to these guidelines.

- [Call for proposals dated 28 September 2016](#)
- [Schedule for the Excellence Strategy through 2019](#)
- [Funding criteria](#)
- [Instructions on writing letters of intent for the Universities of Excellence funding line](#)
(available in German only)
- Proposal template (to be published in autumn 2017)

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I Objectives and Characteristics of the Universities of Excellence Funding Line

According to the administrative agreement between the federal and state governments, the purpose of the Universities of Excellence funding line is *“to strengthen universities as institutions and university consortia in the long term and further develop their international leading role in research on the basis of successful Clusters of Excellence”* (Section 1). As in the Clusters of Excellence funding line, the Universities of Excellence funding line aims to *“support subject-based and strategic profiling, which may relate to all performance areas”* (Preamble) in order to strengthen universities. According to Section 4 Paragraph 2, applicant universities in the Universities of Excellence funding line shall submit a *“strategic, institution-based overall concept and a rough funding plan”* (hereinafter referred to as *“overall strategy”*).

The Excellence Strategy focuses on the funding of top-level research, which is why the performance area *“research”* is given priority in the selection process. |¹ In the Universities of Excellence funding line, other performance areas and their interrelations are therefore always considered in terms of their role in the university’s overall strategy for the expansion of top-level research. In this funding line, universities can submit a proposal as an individual institution (University of Excellence) or as a consortium of universities (University Excellence Consortium).

With regard to the **status quo and prior achievements** applicant universities are expected to demonstrate a very high standard of quality in their overall profile, level of academic performance and starting situation(s) in regard to expanding their leading international position; they are also expected to have a high degree of capability for strategy development and action-taking capacity. This shall enable them to analyse and evaluate performance and potential in all performance areas (research, teaching, transfer |² and research-infrastructure) as well as in the framework and environmental conditions and to draw strategic and operational conclusions on this basis.

With respect to **future planning**, applicant universities are expected to present an overall strategy with long-term sustainability. Starting from the status quo, prior achievements, and an analysis of strengths and weaknesses, this strategy is supposed to set out defined objectives, taking the whole university or university consortium into account. Planning can incorporate all performance areas (research, teaching, transfer and research-infrastructure) as well as supporting structures and processes. The overall strategy is supposed to enable the individual university or university consortium to establish itself among the leading group in the international competitive field and build on its international leading position, visibility and networking in the long term. It shall also document the individual university’s or the university consortium’s capacity for institutional renewal against the backdrop of the long-term nature of the funding.

A University Excellence Consortium is a group of two or three universities which already visibly engage in cooperation. It is supposed to bring together high-achieving partners on the basis of academically driven considerations, each having its own substantial research capabilities. A proposal must be based on long-term shared objectives within a framework of long-term institutional cooperation. It must demonstrate that the

¹ The understanding of *“performance areas”* applied here refers to the *“Perspektiven des deutschen Wissenschaftssystems”* formulated by the Wissenschaftsrat (WR, German Council of Science and Humanities), according to which science and the humanities contain a whole spectrum of different performance dimensions. These are seen as closely connected, partly constitutive for each other and mutually beneficial (p. 25). Starting from this premise, next to research and teaching, transfer and research-infrastructure also rank among a university’s core tasks. See Wissenschaftsrat: *Perspektiven des deutschen Wissenschaftssystems*, Cologne 2013, p.8 and pp. 25f.

² In an academic sense, specified academic and technological knowledge is seen as the subject matter of transfer. The performance area transfer in a broader sense covers the dialogical interaction between academic actors and partners outside academia, for example from society, culture, the private sector and politics, in which a transmission of academic and technological knowledge takes place. See Wissenschaftsrat: *Wissens- und Technologietransfer als Gegenstand institutioneller Strategien* | Positionspapier (Drs. 5665-16), Weimar October 2016, pp. 5 and 8ff. and Wissenschaftsrat: *Perspektiven des deutschen Wissenschaftssystems*, Cologne 2013, pp. 25f.

overall strategy will give rise to further synergies and create added value, both for the consortium as a whole and for each participating institution. Cooperation between the consortium partners may be both additive and complementary with regard to subject areas, areas of focus and organisational structures.

The Excellence Strategy offers long-term funding opportunities to both first-time applicants and universities which have previously received funding through the Excellence Initiative. Applicants are required to demonstrate the plausibility of their chosen overall strategy as an individual university or as a university consortium. The funding line is fundamentally open to different types of overall strategies and forms of cooperation.

II Eligibility Requirements and Formal Funding Requirements

1 Eligibility requirements and participation of cooperation partners

Universities and university consortia in Germany, represented by their heads, are eligible to submit proposals. A university may only submit **one** proposal: either as an individual applicant university or as an applicant in a consortium of two or three universities. Proposals for a university consortium may also be submitted by universities in different federal states.

Applicant universities may also involve cooperation partners in the overall strategy who do not have applicant status (e.g. other universities, universities of applied sciences, non-university research institutions, private sector institutions and institutions from other areas of society). A distinction is made between the following forms of participation:

- a) Cooperating institutions participating in the proposal; these may be for example non-university research institutions, universities or universities of applied sciences in Germany with which intensive cooperation takes place in a strategically important research area and/or another performance area.
- b) Cooperating institutions not participating in the proposal; these may be for example non-university research institutions, universities or universities of applied sciences within or outside Germany with which strategic partnerships exist and which play a specific role in the implementation of the overall strategy.

2 Proposal submission

The proposal must be sent to the head office of the Wissenschaftsrat (WR, German Council of Science and Humanities) and signed by the head of the university or, in the case of university consortia, the heads of the universities. The proposal must be accompanied by a letter from the ministry in charge expressing the support of the federal state for the proposal. The letter must also contain a commitment to provide co-funding (25 % of the requested funding) and confirmation that the proposed projects are in line with the federal state's higher education policy aims and legal regulations. For University Excellence Consortia composed of members from different federal states, **one** joint supporting letter, signed by all research ministries in the participating states must be submitted.

3 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 this university. The submission of a proposal as a University Excellence Consortium by two or three jointly applying universities requires the funding of at least three Clusters of Excellence at these universities. In this case, each university involved in the consortium needs to either have acquired funding for at least one Cluster of Excellence or participate in one Cluster of Excellence supported by multiple universities.

4 Counting joint Clusters of Excellence for individual universities and university consortia

In the determination of whether the proposal requirements for the Universities of Excellence funding line are met, there are also taken into account Clusters of Excellence supported by multiple universities (joint Clusters of Excellence). For example, if a Cluster of Excellence is supported by two or, in exceptional cases, three applicant universities, this Cluster of Excellence can be counted as a proposal requirement in the Universities of Excellence funding line for two or, in exceptional cases, three universities. In verifying the formal eligibility requirements for a university consortium, Clusters of Excellence supported with applicant universities within the consortium or with universities outside the consortium will be counted.

III Object of Funding

In line with the principle of “funding top-level research”, funding is offered for projects related to the implementation of the overall strategy. Projects may contribute to subject-based profiling and relate to the institution or consortium as a whole as well as to individual subject areas. Funding for individuals can also be incorporated in the projects. It is also possible to propose projects relating to the performance areas of teaching, transfer and research-infrastructure where these are aimed at supporting top-level research and are of significant importance to the overall strategy. In this respect, proposals can be submitted for projects to improve organisational development and the framework conditions for researchers at all career levels. These may address structures and processes of governance and administrative structures or areas such as early career support (including early research independence), recruitment and staff development, equal opportunity, internationalisation as well as cooperation.

Projects may follow new approaches, incorporate existing best practices and further develop them, provided that they fit into the overall strategy. Measures funded through the Excellence Initiative can be continued, provided that they are consistent with the objectives of the overall strategy and represent a logical continuation which is also in line with the programme objectives of the Excellence Strategy.

The proposal must plausibly explain how the projects can be operationalised and how they are suitable for achieving long-term improvements. These projects may be intended for short-term, medium-term or long-term implementation. Projects may be further developed and redesigned after the Committee of Experts’ evaluation which takes place every seven years, as long as they are still aligned with the objectives of the programme and the overall strategy of the University of Excellence or University Excellence Consortium.

IV Proposal requirements in the Universities of Excellence Funding Line

The annotated proposal template, which will be made available in autumn 2017, must be used to create the proposal. Proposals must be submitted in German and English, with the English version being definitive. The proposal has three parts:

- (1) Proposal text outlining the status quo and prior achievements as well as the plans and potential,
- (2) Funding plan and
- (3) Data annex.

1 Preparing the proposal text

The proposal text consists of two parts. First, the status quo and prior achievements must be outlined. Building on this, the plans and potential of the university/the university consortium must be described within the framework of a coherent and plausible overall strategy.

Status quo and prior achievements

The presentation of the status quo and prior achievements must cover the overall profile of the university or university consortium, the individual starting situation(s) as well as the academic performance of the institution or university consortium. The individual university or university consortium is requested to present a differentiated self-assessment in the form of an analysis of strengths and weaknesses which encompasses all performance areas, takes the framework and environmental conditions into account and documents monitoring measures. The projects listed in the 'Plans and potential' section are assessed with respect to the status quo and prior achievements.

Plans and potential

In the second part of the proposal, the overarching aims of the university or university consortium associated with the overall strategy and the planned projects must be described and justified. The defined objectives, strategy and projects must be coherent and plausible. The potential impact of the planned projects to improve the level of performance in research, to further develop the performance areas of teaching, transfer and research-infrastructure (as applicable), to improve the framework conditions for researchers at all career levels and to advance early career support (including early research independence) as well as equal opportunity must be convincingly presented. An explanation must also be given as to the extent to which the planned projects will help to improve the positioning of the university or university consortium in regional, national and, especially, international settings. Furthermore, the effectiveness of governance and administrative structures must be explained with a view to the implementation of the overall strategy. The proposal must plausibly explain how these support the further development of academic performance and are suitable for enabling long-term strategic action and control. The proposal must convincingly present the capacity of the university or consortium for institutional renewal and show how this is supported by existing or planned structures and processes. The time management and budget have to be made plausible with a view to the individual projects and the overall volume. The feasibility of the projects must also be plausibly explained. In addition, statements have to be made on quality assurance measures and success monitoring mechanisms which will be used to gauge the effectiveness of the overall strategy and ensure its implementation. Applicant universities are supposed to present this in view of the external evaluation which takes place every seven years as part of the programme.

The strategic objectives set out in the proposal to attract a university allowance within the Clusters of Excellence funding line are also expected to be in line with the objectives outlined as part of the overall strategy.

For proposals as a university consortium, a number of additional aspects must be taken into consideration when describing the overall strategy besides the requirements necessary for individual applicant universities. Universities submitting a proposal as part of a university consortium must first demonstrate the quality of their cooperation to promote excellent research and document actual, visible cooperation which has taken place to date. Secondly, the objectives of the university consortium must be explained in relation to the objectives of the individual universities, and a plausible explanation must be given as to what synergies will be achieved through the formation of the university consortium and what added value it provides in relation to the various performance areas. The proposal should furthermore state the benefits generated by the reciprocal relationship of the university consortium partners for the university consortium as a whole and the individual university.

2 Calculating the funding plan

The funding plan covers the period from the start of funding to the completion of the first evaluation (1 November 2019 to 31 October 2026) and shall be broken down into staff costs, direct project costs and investment costs for each individual year. In order to assess the adequacy of the requested funds, a project list

with the estimated total sums (for the period up to the first evaluation) is also expected. Table templates will be provided for this purpose.

In a proposal as a University Excellence Consortium, a separate table shall also be provided showing the annual share of staff costs, direct project costs and investment costs for each applicant university.

3 Preparing the data annex

The data annex is important for the recording and assessment of universities' current performance (status quo and prior achievements) and the assessment of the projects planned on the basis of the status quo. The data annex must contain the university's basic data (including total budget, number of professors, academic staff, doctoral researchers, students, graduates, supervision relationships, number of completed doctorates and habilitations, number of professorial appointments) and evidence of prior achievements in research (including third-party funding, awards, rankings, patents) and in other performance areas. Where data input is requested, it is based on the *Recommendations on the Specification of the Research Core Dataset* issued by the WR in 2016. ³ Table templates will be provided for this purpose.

In the data annex for a university consortium proposal, the basic data listed above must be provided for each applicant university along with evidence of prior achievements in research and other relevant performance areas. Evidence must also be provided of previous joint academic cooperation in research (e.g. joint appointments, joint degree and doctoral programmes, joint Clusters of Excellence and other joint research projects) and other relevant performance areas. The applicant universities must provide evidence of their cooperation through a set of regulations which is binding for all members of the university consortium; it must be submitted along with the proposal. In particular, this shall contain information regarding the purpose and tasks of the university consortium, bodies, responsibilities/decision-making authority, process regulations, usage regulations (infrastructures, work results), funding modalities and exit regulations. An organisational chart showing the decision-making structures, including all relevant bodies and committees, must be enclosed with the regulations.

V Funding Criteria

The Committee of Experts for the Excellence Strategy has agreed on a set of funding criteria for the selection process on the basis of the administrative agreement between the federal and state governments (Section 4 Paragraph 3) for the Universities of Excellence funding line (see "[Funding Criteria](#)").

The evaluation, the comparative assessment and the funding decision are based firstly on the coherence of the overall profile of the institution(s) in light of the starting condition(s) in place at the individual university or university consortium and the level of academic performance and secondly on the quality of the planning based on the status quo and the prior achievements as well as the potential of the overall strategy. The decision on long-term funding is based solely on academically driven criteria.

In the individual evaluation as well as the comparative assessment of applicant universities, the different starting conditions and previous academic and institutional progress made by universities already funded through the Excellence Initiative and new applicants are taken into account.

³ Wissenschaftsrat: Empfehlungen zur Spezifikation des Kerndatensatz Forschung (Drs. 5066-16), Berlin January 2016. Available to download: <http://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archiv/5066-16.pdf>

VI Procedure

1 Preparation for the evaluation: letter of intent

The Excellence Strategy is carried out consecutively in two separate funding lines, Clusters of Excellence and Universities of Excellence. Universities intending to submit a proposal in the Universities of Excellence funding line are requested to submit letters of intent to the WR head office by the cut-off deadline of 21 February 2018 (noon). (See [“Instructions on writing letters of intent for the Universities of Excellence funding line”](#) (German version only) with additional notes).

A university can only submit one letter of intent: either as an individual university or as an applicant within a university consortium of two or three universities. Once submitted, universities cannot extend the constellation of applicants by adding universities. A later withdrawal from a university consortium and the application as individual university or university consortium consisting of two consortium partners is possible once the funding decisions in the Clusters of Excellence funding line have been made, provided that the formal funding requirements (see Chapter II) are met. Submitting a letter of intent does not oblige potential applicants to submit a proposal.

The information provided in the letter of intent does not replace the proposal and does not form part of the evaluation. In the letters of intent, universities are requested to provide brief details of their current profile, framework and environmental conditions, and envisaged plans in the proposal. This information is required for organisational preparation for the on-site visits and in order to identify and contact primarily international experts in good time and prior to submission of the proposals. On the basis of the letter of intent, the WR head office will contact each university to arrange the on-site visits. Universities are requested to keep the head office informed if any changes are anticipated in the overall strategy and/or the focal areas in connection with the proposal, which could impact on the organisational planning of the on-site visit and the recruitment of experts.

2 Selection process: proposal, on-site visit, assessment, decision

There is no draft phase or formal preselection in the Universities of Excellence funding line. Following the funding decision on Clusters of Excellence on 27 September 2018, universities which meet the formal funding requirements (see Section II) may submit proposals by the cut-off deadline of 10 December 2018 (noon). All proposals which satisfy the proposal requirements will be evaluated on-site during the period January to April 2019 by international groups of experts. Discussions during on-site visits will normally take place in English. Following the on-site visits, the evaluation results will be comparatively assessed by the Committee of Experts and decision proposals will be prepared. The funding decision will be made by the Excellence Commission on 19 July 2019. Funding will begin on 1 November 2019.

3 Number of possible grants

As of **1 November 2019**, in the event of success in the competitive process, a maximum of 11 grants can be awarded. A University Consortium of Excellence is counted as one grant, so the number of funded universities may exceed eleven. No minimum number of grants is specified in the administrative agreement.

As of **1 November 2026**, in the event of success in the competitive process, a maximum of 15 grants can be awarded. Universities which have been funded since 2019 are not required to go through another proposal process after seven years; they will be reviewed in the evaluation process that takes place every seven years and, if the evaluation is positive and they satisfy the formal funding requirements (minimum number of required Clusters of Excellence), they will continue to receive funding. Universities which have not yet been funded in the programme can submit proposals as part of a new proposal round. The maximum number of

15 grants may therefore include both Universities of Excellence or University Excellence Consortia from the first selection round and Universities of Excellence or University Excellence Consortia which have been successful with a new proposal. The number of new grants is therefore also dependent on the number of universities from the first selection round (2019) which continue to receive funding.

VII Expenditure Planning and Funding

1 Funding duration

Universities of Excellence and University Excellence Consortia receive long-term funding. This is subject to the formal verification of the required minimum number of Clusters of Excellence and a successful evaluation every seven years. If the evaluation is negative, financial grants cease and the institution receives completion funding on a diminishing basis from the federal government and the state in which it is based (“host state”), for a maximum of three years.

2 Funding volume

A total of approximately €148 million per year is earmarked for the Universities of Excellence funding line. For each individual university the federal and state governments have estimated annual proposal-dependent funding of €10 to €15 million and for each University Excellence Consortium €15 to €28 million. The exact funding amounts will be decided by the Excellence Commission on the basis of the submitted funding plans and calculated individually for each grant.

3 Cost types

Within the funding framework it is possible to apply for staff costs, direct projects costs and investment costs which contribute to the implementation of the overall strategy as a University of Excellence or a University Excellence Consortium. For all requested funds a funding plan must be submitted for the next seven years, divided into yearly tranches and according to staff costs, direct project costs and investment costs. The plausibility of the requested funding volume is one of the funding criteria and is also taken into account in the evaluation with respect to the achieved impact.

As the funding takes the form of long-term funding from the federal government and the host state in accordance with the relevant state regulations on basic funding, the requested funds do not have to be restricted exclusively to additionally incurred direct expenditure as is the case with expenditure-based project funding. As a result, no programme allowances intended solely to cover indirect costs arising from proposed projects are offered.

4 Funding recipients and external participants

The funding recipient is the University of Excellence or University Excellence Consortium. Where permitted by the provisions of state law, recipient universities can forward funds to participating partner institutions in Germany in the form of temporary project funding. The partner institutions keep documentary evidence of the use of the project funds made available to them, which the university incorporates in its reporting for the state. Cooperation partners from the private sector and from outside Germany cannot receive funding from the Excellence Strategy.

5 Provision of funds

A total of 75 % of funds are provided by the federal government and 25 % by the host states. ⁴ For the joint funding of Universities of Excellence and University Excellence Consortia, the federal government allocates the annual federal share to the host state(s). The host state draws down the annual allocation as and when necessary. The state cannot build up reserves from federal funds. The state budget indicates the sum of the federal and state share under the funding purpose “University of Excellence” for each university separately from other university funding. The provision of funds by the federal government to the states is in principle tied to the budget year.

6 Regulations on financial resource management

The funding of Universities of Excellence and University Excellence Consortia is subject to the regulations of the host state for the basic funding of universities. These regulations also determine the modalities of financial resource management and use and, where applicable, the mutual interchangeability of the staff costs, direct project costs and investment costs approved.

Financial resources are earmarked for the programme objectives and must be used in accordance with the funding plan approved along with the proposal. The host state is responsible for ensuring and verifying the use of earmarked funds. The state verifies that funds have been used at the universities as specified and submits abridged financial expenditure reports to the federal government. The responsible state audit office is that of the host state; the state-specific provisions of budget and cash law apply accordingly. The rights of the Federal Audit Office in accordance with Section 91 of the Federal Budget Code are not affected.

Sufficient transparency as to the amount of the federal and state share and earmarking must also be ensured in the budget of the university/universities. Provided that it is permitted by state law, funds may also be used for the construction and equipment of buildings if these have been applied for and approved to implement the overall strategy. In cases of proposed construction projects, timely consultation with the host state is recommended.

In the case of interstate University Excellence Consortia, funds for each funded university are managed in accordance with the regulations of the host state for basic funding. The annual shares for each applicant university must be shown in the University Excellence Consortium’s funding plan. For the funding of an interstate University Excellence Consortium, the federal government allocates the annual federal share proportionately to the appropriate states. Should any changes occur over time in the amount of the shares for the universities participating in the University Excellence Consortium, the prior consent of the federal government and the host states is required.

⁴ The funding of the complete programme is subject to funds being made available by the legislative bodies.

VIII Further Information

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):

<http://www.qwk-bonn.de/fileadmin/Papers/Verwaltungsvereinbarung-Exzellenzstrategie-2016.pdf>

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

<http://www.qwk-bonn.de/themen/wissenschaftspakte/exzellenzstrategie/>

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

https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/en/fields-of-activity/excellence_strategy/start.html

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

http://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/programmes/excellence_strategy/index.html

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