

Excellence Initiative Institutions Call for Swift Decision on Future Development

Meeting in Bad Honnef attended by Spokespersons of Graduate Schools, Clusters of Excellence and Institutional Strategies / In-Depth Talks on Successes and Prospects

The largest meeting to date of spokespersons of graduate schools, clusters of excellence and institutional strategies has ended with an urgent appeal to politicians to continue and further develop the German federal government's and federal states' Excellence Initiative. At the invitation of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) and the German Council of Science and Humanities, representatives of more than 100 institutions funded under the Excellence Initiative spent two days in Bad Honnef in talks with each other, with the DFG and the German Council of Science and Humanities, and with politicians. They took stock of the programme, which started in 2006, paying particular attention to its second phase which began in 2012. Under the guiding question "Excellence Initiative – and then?", they discussed the framework conditions and prospects which would make the competition to improve high calibre research at German universities sustainable in the future.

The unanimous outcome of the numerous plenary discussions and workshops was that the Excellence Initiative has offered impetus to the German research system in a variety of ways and made German universities significantly more visible and attractive as locations for top-class research and innovation, both domestically and internationally. This success must be leveraged for the future. An essential prerequisite for this is swift decision-making by the federal government and the federal states on appropriate financing for top-class research at universities when the current funding ends in October 2017.

Speaking in advance of discussions between the federal government and the federal states at the Joint Science Conference (GWK) and at the Minister Presidents Conference, DFG President Professor Dr. Peter Strohschneider said: "This meeting has shown that there is a veritable 'spirit of excellence' shared by researchers from all the funded

institutions and universities. They are the people responsible for the success this competition has enjoyed so far and it is they who now need clarity and prospects that will allow them to plan for the future as quickly as possible." The Chairman of the German Council of Science and Humanities, Professor Dr. Manfred Prenzel, stressed: "Our evaluation has once again shown that the Excellence Initiative has been a powerful incentive for formulating strategies at the universities. It is essential that they retain the option of designing their own organisational structures conducive to good research."

The positive effect that the Excellence Initiative has had at every level became clear at the meeting in Bad Honnef. By providing new and sustainable structures, the programme has been used to improve the framework conditions for outstanding research. The success has been evident in significantly more productive research, the emergence of centres and regions with strong research capacity and much more scientific knowledge transferred to business and society. The participating institutions and their researchers have created numerous new synergies within and between the universities and close partnerships between university and non-university research groups on the basis of new collaborative models. The university remains at the heart of all this activity. The situation of early career researchers has improved in particular, with new internationally competitive standards for graduate training and the emergence of a new generation of researchers with an interdisciplinary education. With all this, the summary continued, the Excellence Initiative has created a model with international appeal which many countries are using when designing their own excellence programmes.

In a concluding discussion with the State Ministers for Science Theresia Bauer (Baden-Württemberg), Professor Dr. Sabine Kunst (Brandenburg) and Professor Dr. Sabine von Schorlemer (Saxony), CDU Member of Parliament Alexandra Dinges-Dierig and Dr. Ulrich Schüller, who is responsible for the research system at the Federal Ministry for Education and Research, the participants listed the elements for a future-oriented development of the programme that had emerged: The funding formats should continue to be open to new topics, ideas and applicants, the use of funding should remain flexible and the funding duration should be aligned to the processes to attain academic and research qualifications. There was fundamental agreement that retaining scientific quality was essential and that selection processes should be strictly on the basis of academic and scientific criteria.

Summing up, the DFG and the German Council of Science and Humanities said: "Discussions with politicians were characterised by a very positive tone and agreement on key assessments. We are therefore optimistic about the upcoming policy decisions."