



FAQ - Excellence Strategy -

Last updated: July 2019

Content

General information and procedures concerning the Excellence Strategy	2
What is the Excellence Strategy?.....	2
What are the objectives of the Excellence Strategy?	2
How much funding is available under the Excellence Strategy?	2
What target group does the Excellence Strategy have?	2
What is an alliance in the context of the Excellence Strategy?.....	2
How can institutions apply?	3
What is funded?	3
What does the evaluation cover?	3
What is a science-led procedure?.....	3
What is the composition of the Panel of Experts?.....	3
What are the tasks of the Panel of Experts?.....	3
What is the composition of the Excellence Commission?	4
Who takes the final funding decision?	4
What voting model is used for the final funding decision?.....	4
Clusters of Excellence	4
What is a Cluster of Excellence?	4
How much funding is available for Clusters of Excellence and the University Allowance?	4
What funding criteria must be fulfilled by Clusters of Excellence?	4
What is the evaluation process for the applications for Clusters of Excellence?.....	5
How many Clusters of Excellence currently receive funding?	5
How long can Clusters of Excellence receive funding?	5
University Allowance.....	5
What is the University Allowance?	5
How can a university apply for a University Allowance?	6
How much is the University Allowance that a university can receive?	6
Is a university alliance also entitled to receive the University Allowance?	6
Is a University of Excellence also entitled to receive the University Allowance?	6
Universities of Excellence	6
What is a University of Excellence?	6
How much funding is available for Universities of Excellence?	6
When can a university apply for the status of a University of Excellence?	6
What funding criteria must Universities of Excellence fulfil?	6
How is a funding decision prepared and who takes it?	7
What are the eleven Universities of Excellence that currently receive funding?	7
What approach did the science-led selection procedure follow?.....	8
Can a University of Excellence lose its permanent funding?	8
Will there be another opportunity to become a University of Excellence in the future?.....	8
Overarching issues.....	8
Will Universities of Excellence be designated as Federal Universities?	8
Will Universities of Excellence lead to a permanent defining of structures?	9
Is there a disadvantage for small and medium-sized universities or disciplines?	9
Why is funding of cutting-edge research necessary at higher education institutions?	9
Will the Excellence Strategy lead to an imbalance between research and teaching?.....	9
How do students benefit from the Excellence Strategy?	10

General information and procedures concerning the Excellence Strategy

What is the Excellence Strategy?

The Excellence Strategy is a funding programme of the Federal Government and the *Länder* to strengthen cutting-edge research and the international competitiveness of German universities on a lasting basis. The Excellence Strategy was adopted in 2016 to succeed the Excellence Initiative. Such beacons of research have a positive impact on the entire university landscape which means that the breadth and depth of higher education and research in Germany also benefit. The evaluation of the Excellence Initiative has demonstrated this effect.

What are the objectives of the Excellence Strategy?

The overarching objectives of the Excellence Strategy are the following:

- Sustainable strengthening of science in Germany by means of improving its international competitiveness
- Strengthening universities by encouraging and supporting top-quality research, profile building and cooperation in the science system
- Establishing cutting-edge research and improving the quality of higher education and science in Germany in general

The International Commission for the Evaluation of the Excellence Initiative (also known as the "Imboden Commission") unanimously agreed that the follow-up programme to the Excellence Initiative would have to focus even more closely on its central objective, namely the strengthening of cutting-edge research in Germany and improving the international competitiveness of universities as central pillars of the research system. In view of limited funds, the effectiveness of the Excellence Strategy must not be hampered by diluting these with other objectives, no matter how justified and urgent they might be.

How much funding is available under the Excellence Strategy?

The Federal Government and the *Länder* provide a total of 533 million euros annually, starting in 2018, including 385 million euros for the first funding line on Clusters of Excellence and 148 million euros for the second funding line on Universities of Excellence. The funds are provided by the Federal Government and the respective host *Länder* on a 75:25 basis.

What target group does the Excellence Strategy have?

The overarching objective of the Excellence Strategy is to strengthen universities. This is why only individual universities or an alliance of several universities can apply. Further cooperation partners, such as non-university research institutions, universities of applied sciences, companies and other societal actors can, of course, be included.

What is an alliance in the context of the Excellence Strategy?

In an alliance, several universities submit a joint application in order to promote excellent research in a cooperative structure. The following must be clearly visible for each university participating in such an alliance: the visible previous and ongoing cross-cutting cooperation, the synergies, and the scientific and structural added value. The lasting institutional strategic cooperation must be defined in a binding, explicit set of rules. These aspects form part of the scientific evaluation.

How can institutions apply?

Universities or university alliances, represented by their management, can apply for and receive funding. Applications can be submitted for one or several Clusters of Excellence and, in addition, for a University of Excellence. Applications must be submitted via the *Länder* authorities responsible for science and higher education to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft e.V. (DFG) in the case of Clusters of Excellence, and to the German Council of Science and Humanities in the case of Universities of Excellence.

What is funded?

Funding is provided for science-related activities in the two funding lines, “Clusters of Excellence” and “Universities of Excellence”. Internationally competitive research fields at universities or university alliances receive project-related funding in the Clusters of Excellence. The Universities of Excellence funding line is meant to strengthen universities or university alliances as institutions as well as the development of their leading international position in research. Funding is permanent. A precondition for funding as a University of Excellence is the funding of at least two Clusters of Excellence (at least three for university alliances).

What does the evaluation cover?

The prospects for the development and maintenance of internationally competitive, excellent cutting-edge research including the promotion of the next generation of scientists are evaluated on the basis of previous outstanding scientific achievements on an international scale. In both funding lines, the evaluation is based on an analysis of strengths and weaknesses which includes assessments of thematic research priorities and of further evaluation areas, namely teaching, research infrastructures and transfer of ideas and knowledge.

What is a science-led procedure?

A science-led procedure guarantees the selection of the best applicants based on scientific quality. A scientific evaluation is conducted by internationally acknowledged experts holding the required competences. The principles of good scientific practice and rules for avoiding conflicts of interest must be applied. The selection criteria and the rules of the competition must be transparent and verifiable. The DFG conducts the science-led procedure for the Clusters of Excellence funding line, the German Council of Science and Humanities for the Universities of Excellence funding line. Over 600 international experts participated in the scientific evaluation of the Clusters of Excellence funding line, and over 200 in the Universities of Excellence funding line, with more than 90 percent of them from abroad.

What is the composition of the Panel of Experts?

The Panel of Experts consists of 39 experts with proven experience in various research fields who have spent many years abroad and have worked in higher education management, teaching or industry. Its members are proposed jointly by the DFG Senate and the Scientific Commission of the German Council of Science and Humanities and appointed by the Joint Science Conference (GWK) of the Federal Government and the *Länder*. The Chairperson of the German Council of Science and Humanities or the President of the DFG are non-voting members of the Panel of Experts and chair the Panel.

What are the tasks of the Panel of Experts?

The tasks of the Panel of Experts include, in particular,

- defining the eligibility requirements taking into account the criteria set out in the administrative agreement,
- assessing the outlines for Clusters of Excellence on the basis of scientific evaluations and deciding which outlines are eligible for application,
- assessing applications for Clusters and Universities of Excellence on the basis of scientific evaluations,
- providing funding recommendations to the Excellence Commission,
- assessing the results of the evaluation of the Universities of Excellence,
- reporting on the programme to the Joint Science Conference.

What is the composition of the Excellence Commission?

The Excellence Commission consists of the Panel of Experts and the Federal and *Länder* ministers responsible for science and research. The chair of the Panel of Experts also chairs the Excellence Commission.

Who takes the final funding decision?

On the basis of the Panel of Experts' recommendations, the Excellence Commission takes the funding decisions on the Clusters and Universities of Excellence in a science-led procedure. The voting members of the Panel of Experts decide with a simple majority of the votes cast. In the Excellence Commission, the voting members of the Panel of Experts and the ministers of the *Länder* have one vote each while the Federal Minister has 16 votes. Thus, the Panel of Experts holds 39 votes while the representatives of the Federal Government and the *Länder* together hold 32. The majority of votes in the Excellence Commission is therefore held by representatives of science.

What voting model is used for the final funding decision?

A simple majority of all votes cast is needed for decisions on Clusters of Excellence. Decisions on Universities of Excellence require a simple majority of the votes cast of the members of the Panel of Experts and a majority of at least 25 votes of the Federal and *Länder* ministers.

Clusters of Excellence

What is a Cluster of Excellence?

Internationally competitive research fields at universities or university alliances receive project-related funding in the Clusters of Excellence.

How much funding is available for Clusters of Excellence and the University Allowance?

The vast majority of funds for the Excellence Strategy is available for Clusters of Excellence and the University Allowance. All in all, the Federal Government and the *Länder* provide about 385 million euros annually in the form of temporary project funding by the DFG. This amount also includes an overhead allowance of 22 percent of the direct project funds of a Cluster of Excellence.

What funding criteria must be fulfilled by Clusters of Excellence?

Excellence Clusters must demonstrate

- excellence of research and of the involved scientists in the respective thematic research field;

- scientific excellence and coherence of the research strategy for the development of the thematic research field, for interdisciplinary work and for international networking;
- the special nature, originality and risk tolerance of the research;
- coherence and quality of the promotion of young scientists;
- quality of the strategies for the professional HR development and for equal opportunities in science;
- quality of the strategic development strategy on organization and further development of the Cluster of Excellence (governance) and compatibility of this development strategy with that of the university or alliance;
- capability of the partners involved and coherence and quality of the cooperation strategy based on binding agreements, if applicable;
- quality of the proposed measures for research-oriented teaching in the thematic research area (with a special focus on the communication of good scientific practice), if applicable;
- quality of the proposed measures for idea and knowledge transfer, if applicable;
- quality of the proposed measures to use research infrastructures, if applicable.

The Panel of Experts in its first meeting on 20/21 September 2016 decided on the specific details which were then published by the DFG (including deadlines for application).

What is the evaluation process for the applications for Clusters of Excellence?

The DFG publishes an open call for Clusters of Excellence every seven years. The call is two-tiered for new Clusters of Excellence (outline proposals and full applications), and single-tiered for continuing a Cluster of Excellence (full applications only). First, the outlines are assessed by specialist panels. Then, on the basis of these assessments, the Panel of Experts decides which applicants may submit full applications for Clusters of Excellence. Full applications for new Clusters of Excellence or for the continuation of existing Clusters of Excellence are also assessed by specialist panels. The Panel of Experts then gives recommendations on the applications for new and continued funding on the basis of scientific assessments. Finally, the Excellence Commission decides on the applications on the basis of these recommendations.

How many Clusters of Excellence currently receive funding?

On 28 September 2017, the Panel of Experts consisting of internationally renowned scientists selected a total of 88 projects out of 195 outline proposals for Clusters of Excellence. On 27 September 2018, following further scientific evaluation, the Excellence Commission selected a total of 57 applications by 34 universities for funding for a 7-year period starting on 1 January 2019. An interactive map showing the current Clusters of Excellence can be found at www.dfg.de/exzellenzstrategie/exu-karte/

How long can Clusters of Excellence receive funding?

The funding period for Clusters of Excellence is two times seven years; new applications are possible, including in the same area of research.

University Allowance

What is the University Allowance?

The University Allowance is a strategy allowance which universities that host Clusters of Excellence can receive in order to strengthen their governance and strategic orientation by the university management.

How can a university apply for a University Allowance?

Only universities that successfully applied for one or several Clusters of Excellence are eligible for the University Allowance. The university management will have to include a lean presentation of the strategic university objectives in the application for funding of a Cluster of Excellence. This will then be checked for plausibility in the context of the assessment of the Cluster of Excellence.

How much is the University Allowance that a university can receive?

The University Allowance is 1 million euros p.a. per Cluster of Excellence. If a university hosts several Clusters of Excellence, the University Allowance is 1 million euros p.a. for the first Cluster of Excellence, 750,000 for the second and 500,000 for every further Cluster of Excellence.

Is a university alliance also entitled to receive the University Allowance?

Yes, for university alliances, the University Allowance per Cluster of Excellence is distributed proportionally among the partners in the Alliance.

Is a University of Excellence also entitled to receive the University Allowance?

No, funding for a University of Excellence is deemed to cover the amount otherwise provided by the University Allowance; therefore the University Allowance does not apply in this case.

Universities of Excellence

What is a University of Excellence?

The Universities of Excellence funding line is meant to strengthen universities or university alliances as institutions as well as the development of their leading international position in research. A precondition for funding as a University of Excellence is the funding of at least two Clusters of Excellence (at least three for university alliances).

How much funding is available for Universities of Excellence?

From 2019, the Federal Government and the *Länder* are providing a total of about 148 million euros p.a. for eleven funding commitments. Depending on the details of each application, there will be a funding range of 10 to 15 million euros each year for applications by individual universities and 15 to 28 million euros for applications from university alliances. The funds are provided by the Federal Government and the respective host *Länder* on a 75:25 basis.

When can a university apply for the status of a University of Excellence?

The selection and decision procedure for Universities of Excellence takes place only after the decision for the Clusters of Excellence has been taken, since a precondition for funding as a University of Excellence is the funding of at least two Clusters of Excellence located at the university concerned. For university alliances, the number of required Clusters of Excellence increases to at least three, while every university participating in the Alliance must host at least one Cluster of Excellence or must be involved in a common Cluster of Excellence. Clusters of Excellence which receive funding as part of a university alliance are attributed to every one of the universities participating in the Alliance in terms of precondition for funding as University of Excellence.

What funding criteria must Universities of Excellence fulfil?

The following overarching criteria apply to Universities of Excellence:

- Previous excellent research performance of the applicant university or alliance, which is assessed for the purposes of the evaluation according to parameters of scientific performance including the transparent consideration of available statistical data (e.g. external funds, research awards, DFG Funding Atlas, achievements in previous rounds of the Excellence Initiative);
- Coherence and quality of a strategic institution-related overall vision which includes statements on
 - the governance of the university or between the partners involved,
 - research-oriented teaching,
 - the use of research infrastructures,
 - the attractiveness for world-leading scientists in the context of a joint – where applicable – appointment or HR recruitment strategy,
 - HR development and equal opportunities.
- Further criteria:
 - Structural added value and institutional maturity;
 - Presence of a critical mass necessary for the further development of cutting-edge research on an international scale;
 - Quality of the strategy for constant renewal and for maintaining the innovativeness of the University of Excellence;
 - High international ranking and visibility, international networking, national importance of the University of Excellence.

How is a funding decision prepared and who takes it?

The Panel of Experts, comprising a total of 39 renowned scientists, gives a recommendation on the applications which is based on scientific assessments. Finally, the Excellence Commission decides on the applications on the basis of these recommendations. It also defines the amount of permanent funding per University of Excellence.

What are the eleven Universities of Excellence that currently receive funding?

On 19 July, the Panel of Experts announced the final funding decision on the basis of a science-led selection procedure and selected ten universities and one university alliance which will receive permanent funding as Universities of Excellence from 1 November 2019:

- RWTH Aachen University,
- the Berlin University Alliance of the Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, and Technische Universität Berlin,
- Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn,
- Technische Universität Dresden,
- Universität Hamburg,
- Heidelberg University,
- Karlsruhe Institute of Technology,
- University of Konstanz,
- Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich,
- Technical University of Munich,
- Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen

An interactive map showing the current Universities of Excellence can be found at www.dfg.de/exzellenzstrategie/exu-karte/

What approach did the science-led selection procedure follow?

On-site visits were conducted at the 17 individual universities and 2 university alliances between January and May 2019. They were conducted by approx. 12 scientific evaluators for the individual universities and 14 for the university alliances plus 4 members of the Panel of Experts for each. The German Council of Science and Humanities together with the respective evaluators and the members of the Panel of Experts present drafted a summary of the assessment(s) in English which served as the basis for the evaluation reports in German. The Panel of Experts, comprising a total of 39 renowned scientists, then conducted a comparative assessment of the applications on the basis of the scientific assessment(s), and submitted a proposal for a decision to the Expert Commission. The Excellence Commission took the final funding decision on this basis.

Can a University of Excellence lose its permanent funding?

Universities of Excellence are subjected to a regular selective evaluation which takes place every seven years. It is organized by the German Council of Science and Humanities and assessed by the Panel of Experts. The evaluation reviews in particular whether the conditions for joint funding are still fulfilled, which means that every seven years Universities of Excellence must

- once again be successful in applying for at least two or three Clusters of Excellence in the open competition of the first funding line , and
- undergo an evaluation by independent external experts, organized by the German Council of Science and Humanities. The fulfilment of the overarching funding criteria is reviewed.

The result of the evaluation is submitted to the Excellence Commission. If the conditions for joint funding are still fulfilled, the funding is continued. If the evaluation has a negative result, the university or university alliance drops out of funding with a period of diminishing phase-out funding lasting no more than three years.

Will there be another opportunity to become a University of Excellence in the future?

Yes, since the Federal Chancellor and the heads of government of the *Länder* agreed on 16 June 2016 to have a second selection round in 2026 for four new applications. If less than four Universities of Excellence drop out of the permanent joint funding following the first evaluation in 2025, a one-time increase in the number of funding commitments guarantees that four new Universities of Excellence will receive funding if they are successful in the competition. Irrespective of this, the following applies: If a university or university alliance drops out of permanent joint funding or if additional funds become available from other sources, the Excellence Commission will decide on a call for new applications organized by the German Council of Science and Humanities.

Overarching issues

Will Universities of Excellence be designated as Federal Universities?

No, no Universities of Excellence will be designated as “Federal Universities”. The aim of the Excellence Strategy is to provide Federal Government funding for excellent universities not only for a limited period but also on a permanent basis. More permanent positions, better career prospects for young scientists, more time to conduct research, trust in the quality of research – all this is only possible with permanent funding. The basic federal order of Germany and thus the

primary responsibility of the *Länder* for the basic funding of institutions of higher education as a whole, however, remains unaffected.

Will Universities of Excellence lead to a permanent defining of structures?

Successful structures in universities which by nature provide a permanent incentive for constant scientific renewal and striving for academic excellence should have a lasting basis in order to be of benefit to higher education in Germany. That is precisely why the Federal Government and the *Länder* decided in December 2014 that a new constitutional freedom should be used for the successor to the Excellence Initiative. For the first time ever in the German science system, under the Universities of Excellence programme, permanent funding commitments which are jointly financed by the Federal Government and the *Länder* are linked to two stimulating factors – success in a competition for Clusters of Excellence and a regular positive evaluation as a University of Excellence by external experts.

Is there a disadvantage for small and medium-sized universities or disciplines?

No, the state had and has no intention whatsoever to give an advantage or disadvantage to certain disciplines, sizes or forms of cooperation. In the Excellence Strategy, the Federal Government and the *Länder* have provided for funding amounts and scales that depend on the specific applications for Clusters and Universities of Excellence, thus also facilitating smaller applications. The Joint Science Conference has explicitly asked the DFG and the German Council of Science and Humanities to make sure throughout the procedure that the wide range of funding amounts is fully used. The 57 funded Clusters of Excellence cover a range of between 5 and 10 million euros. The size of the funded Universities of Excellence varied in 2017 between 10,600 students (University of Konstanz) and 45,300 students (LMU Munich).

Why is funding of cutting-edge research necessary at higher education institutions?

Internationally visible cutting-edge research is decisive for Germany's competitiveness – not only in Max Planck institutes but also at universities because of their particular importance in the science system. Cutting-edge research at universities is a permanent task which the Federal Government and the *Länder* address jointly. That is why the agreement to fund cutting-edge research at universities was signed by the Federal Chancellor and the heads of government of the *Länder* on 16 June 2016 for an indefinite period.

Will the Excellence Strategy lead to an imbalance between research and teaching?

The Federal Government supports research and teaching both with targeted measures. More than 10 years ago, the Excellence Initiative was launched for cutting-edge research at universities. This is because the competition for reputation and international visibility in science takes place primarily in the field of research. Germany therefore needs internationally recognized research achievements to make higher education and science in Germany attractive as a whole.

We need good training of young people throughout Germany. The future viability of our society largely depends on the intellectual potential and resources of the young generation. To promote these, we need appropriate funding tools to facilitate a large number of high-quality education programmes. With the so-called “Contract into the Future - Strengthening Higher Education Studying and Teaching”, the successor programme to the Higher Education Pact, the Federal Government and the *Länder* are therefore jointly and permanently improving the quality of studying and teaching in higher education and ensuring that there is an adequate number of study programmes. With the agreement on “Innovation in Higher Education Teaching”, which

will replace the Quality Pact for Teaching, the ability to innovate of higher education teaching and its visibility and importance will be strengthened. The promotion of innovative teaching is thus being institutionally anchored for the first time. The Federal Government on its own is permanently investing more than 2 billion euros p.a. in both programmes together.

How do students benefit from the Excellence Strategy?

All institutions of higher education benefit when Germany is perceived as an internationally competitive and outstanding place for science. In general, funding for additional teaching positions also means more study programmes for students. Furthermore, the Excellence Strategy includes differentiated funding tools which are meant to support universities in developing thematic and strategic profiles which can include, in addition to research, accessory fields such as research-oriented teaching.