

# Clusters of Excellence funding line

## Guidelines

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### I Objectives

The Clusters of Excellence funding line aims to promote internationally competitive research fields at universities or in university consortia in the form of projects, also across scientific disciplines. The Clusters of Excellence are to be a key component of strategic and thematic planning at the applicant university or universities, clearly enhancing their profile and requiring them to set priorities. What is more, they are to establish excellent framework conditions for early-career researchers. Together with the Universities of Excellence, Clusters of Excellence contribute to strengthening Germany as a hub of science on a lasting basis, further expanding its international competitiveness.

### II Funding and proposal submission

#### 1 Duration of funding

Clusters of Excellence are funded for a period of seven years from 1 January 2026 to 31 December 2032. Existing Clusters of Excellence can be funded for a further seven years under the Excellence Strategy.

#### 2 Scope of funding

Under the Clusters of Excellence funding line, the German federal and state governments intend to make a total of around €539 million available per year.

Up to 70 Clusters of Excellence can be funded, each with an annual budget of €3 to 10 million. The funding amount for the respective Clusters of Excellence includes a programme allowance of 22 percent of the approved and expended project funds.

Additional funding can be requested for a university allowance in order to strengthen the governance and strategic orientation of universities involved in a Cluster of Excellence.

### **3 Eligibility Requirements**

Universities or consortia of universities in Germany are eligible to apply, represented by their management. Clusters of Excellence can be applied for by a single applicant university or by consortia of several universities. The following applies to Clusters of Excellence comprising several universities: All applicant universities must be substantially involved in the proposed Cluster of Excellence. Furthermore, there must be clear evidence of visible overarching cooperation having been pursued between the institutions to date, as well as recognisable scientific and structural synergies that benefit each of the applicant universities. The respective contribution to collaboration is assessed in the review process, based on such aspects as involvement in and contribution to the research programme, the number of participating researchers in each case, the planned distribution of the requested funds and the infrastructure provided to the Cluster of Excellence. Institutionally consolidated strategic cooperation must also be laid down in a binding set of rules.

With regard to the Universities of Excellence funding line, it should also be noted that participation in a joint Cluster of Excellence is recognised as a funding requirement for a University of Excellence for a maximum of three applicant universities. If more than three universities submit a joint proposal for a Cluster of Excellence, they themselves are to determine which of them – up to a maximum of three applicant universities – are to be credited with participation as a funding requirement for a University of Excellence.

In the case of proposals submitted by several applicant universities, one of them is to be designated as the managing university.

### **4 Participants/collaborations**

It is possible to involve other individual and/or institutional cooperation partners such as external researchers, non-university research institutions, other higher education institutions and also institutions from the private sector or other sectors of society. If partners from the private

sector or other sectors of society are involved, the DFG model agreements (DFG form 41.026 or 41.026a) must be observed when drafting contracts.

[www.dfg.de/formulare/41\\_026](http://www.dfg.de/formulare/41_026)

[www.dfg.de/formulare/41\\_026a](http://www.dfg.de/formulare/41_026a)

## 5 Type of Funding

### Project funds

Funds for staff, direct project costs and instrumentation can be applied for as project funds for a Cluster of Excellence. Staff funding serves to finance those directly employed in the project. This may also include funds for additional professorships and heads of independent junior research groups as well as other personnel and ancillary personnel costs. Funding for direct project costs serves to cover costs directly related to the project, e.g. small instrumentation, consumables, travel, and funds for scientific events and further education. Instrumentation funding is intended for investments in instrumentation and other items whose procurement value exceeds €10,000. The requested funds should take into account the specific circumstances of the subject and the institution in question. The appropriateness of the requested project funds is assessed as part of the review.

### Programme allowance for indirect project costs

A programme allowance amounting to 22 percent of the approved and expended project funds is granted as a supplement to the project funds to cover the indirect costs involved in project implementation. The requirement for this is the existence of guidelines on the use of the programme allowance for indirect project costs at all institutions that are to benefit from the approved programme allowance. For details, see

[www.dfg.de/neuregelungen\\_programmpauschale](http://www.dfg.de/neuregelungen_programmpauschale) (only available in German)

### University allowance

The university allowance of up to €1 million per year is used to cover expenses directly incurred to strengthen the governance and strategic orientation of the applicant university or universities. This can be additionally applied for based on a description of the university's strategic objectives which is to be attached to the proposal for the funding of a Cluster of Excellence. In the case of Clusters of Excellence involving several applicant universities, the university allowance is distributed proportionately among them. If several Clusters of Excellence are approved at one university, the university allowance for the second Cluster of Excellence amounts to €750,000 per year and for each additional Cluster €500,000 per year. For universities that receive funding

as a University of Excellence under the second funding line of the Excellence Strategy, the university allowance is deemed to be compensated by this and is waived for the duration of the funding as a University of Excellence.

The university management is to decide on how the university allowance is used.

No substantive explanations relating to the use of the university allowance are expected as part of the draft proposal.

### **Completion funding**

Clusters of Excellence that are not continued after seven years receive completion funding.

Completion funding is granted on a decreasing basis and limited to a maximum of two years. It should essentially be limited to the funding for staff and direct project costs required to complete the qualification work pursued by early-career researchers who are working on the project.

Each Cluster of Excellence must establish a transparent system of funding allocation to determine how funding is allocated down to the project level. This should be explained in the proposal.

## **III Proposal submission and decision-making procedure**

The proposal submission process under the Clusters of Excellence funding line comprises two stages for new proposals (draft proposal and proposal) and one stage for renewal proposals. In the case of Clusters of Excellence already receiving funding, it is up to the applicants whether they wish to classify their submission as a new or as a renewal proposal.

The basis for funding decisions is the scientific evaluation of the draft proposals and proposals, taking into account outstanding preliminary work, the development prospects presented and the added value generated by the collaboration between the individuals and institutions involved. Applicants are expected to undertake an assessment of their own strengths and weaknesses in all relevant performance dimensions. The following general eligibility criteria apply:

- Research excellence
- Proven track record of the participating researchers
- Quality of the supporting structures
- Environment of the Cluster of Excellence

For details of the eligibility criteria for draft proposals and proposals, see:

[www.dfg.de/formulare/exstra110](http://www.dfg.de/formulare/exstra110)

Decisions on draft proposals and proposals are made by the Committee of Experts for the Excellence Strategy and the Excellence Commission. The Committee of Experts consists of a total of 39 members, all of whom have a proven track record in research in various fields of science and the humanities, representing the entire spectrum of disciplines, and who also have many years of experience abroad, in university management, in teaching or in business. The Excellence Commission is made up of the Committee of Experts and the German federal and state ministers responsible for science and the humanities.

Submission of a new proposal is only permitted as the elaboration of a draft proposal which has been recommended by the Committee of Experts. The proposal stage is only open to those applicant universities which were previously involved as applicants in the relevant draft proposal. A renewal proposal for a Cluster of Excellence already receiving funding can be submitted without previously submitting a draft proposal.

### **New proposals**

Proposal submission for new initiatives under the Clusters of Excellence funding line involves a two-stage process (draft proposals, proposals). Universities or university consortia planning to submit a new proposal under the Clusters of Excellence funding line are requested to submit a non-binding letter of intent electronically via the elan portal. Please use the following template for the letter of intent:

[www.dfg.de/formulare/exstra119](http://www.dfg.de/formulare/exstra119)

Draft proposals must be submitted electronically to the DFG Head Office via the elan portal. They are reviewed by panels based on scientific criteria. The panel review includes a brief discussion involving the reviewers and the researchers of the planned Cluster of Excellence as well as management representatives of the university or universities involved in the proposal. A comparative assessment of the results of the review provides the basis for the decisions made by the Committee of Experts as to which proposals may be submitted.

Please use the following template for the draft proposal:

[www.dfg.de/formulare/exstra120](http://www.dfg.de/formulare/exstra120)

Please note the binding requirements and the information contained in the guidelines when preparing a draft proposal:

[www.dfg.de/formulare/exstra121](http://www.dfg.de/formulare/exstra121)

Universities or university consortia that are admitted to submit a new proposal under the Clusters of Excellence funding line are requested to submit an updated non-binding letter of intent electronically via the elan portal.

### **Renewal proposals**

Clusters of Excellence that have received funding since 2019 may apply for an extension for a further seven years of funding (renewal proposal). This procedure comprises a single stage.

Universities or university consortia planning to submit a renewal proposal under the Clusters of Excellence funding line are requested to submit a non-binding letter of intent electronically via the elan portal. Please use the following template for the letter of intent:

[www.dfg.de/formulare/exstra119](http://www.dfg.de/formulare/exstra119)

New proposals and renewal proposals for Clusters of Excellence are reviewed by panels based on scientific criteria. The review includes a discussion of the proposals involving the reviewers and the researchers of the planned Cluster of Excellence as well as management representatives of the university or universities involved in the proposal. A comparative assessment of the results of the review provides the basis for the recommendations put forward by the Committee of Experts to the Excellence Commission, which decides on funding.

The guidelines for new and renewal proposals will be made available on the DFG website in summer 2023:

[www.dfg.de/foerderung/programme/exzellenzstrategie/formulare\\_merkblaetter](http://www.dfg.de/foerderung/programme/exzellenzstrategie/formulare_merkblaetter)

Draft proposals and proposals must always be submitted in English.

Proposals are to be accompanied by a draft set of bylaws. Assistance here will be provided by the guide to drawing up bylaws for Clusters of Excellence (available in German only), which will be made available on the DFG website in summer 2023:

[www.dfg.de/formulare/exstra140](http://www.dfg.de/formulare/exstra140)

Proposals must have been endorsed by the responsible science authorities of the German federal states concerned before they can be submitted to the DFG.

## **IV Obligations**

In submitting a draft proposal or a proposal to the DFG, individuals with a high degree of scientific responsibility agree to adhere to the principles of good research practice. These principles can be

found in detail in the DFG Code of Conduct *Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Research Practice*, which came into force on 1 August 2019.

[www.dfg.de/good\\_scientific\\_practice](http://www.dfg.de/good_scientific_practice)

Persons with a high degree of scientific responsibility are the up to 25 researchers listed in the draft proposal and/or proposal as having been significantly involved in its compilation. The Rules of Procedure for Dealing with Scientific Misconduct apply to them.

[www.dfg.de/formulare/80\\_01](http://www.dfg.de/formulare/80_01)

Prior to submission of a draft proposal or proposal, all those with a high degree of scientific responsibility must sign a Declaration of Obligation of Compliance (see link to recommended DFG template):

[www.dfg.de/formulare/80\\_02](http://www.dfg.de/formulare/80_02)

The applicant university or universities is/are responsible for gathering the signatures for the compliance forms. The forms must be kept on file by the university or universities (either on a centralised basis at the applicant institution(s) or on a decentralised basis at the employing institution) for ten years following completion of the last funding period. If significantly involved researchers are replaced by new persons during the funding period, it is the responsibility of the applicant university or universities to obtain Declarations of Obligation of Compliance from the new individuals. Likewise, if a person with a high degree of scientific responsibility changes their employing institution, the corresponding Declaration of Obligation of Compliance must be updated. Upon request by the DFG, e.g. in connection with random audit checks and in cases of alleged scientific misconduct, these forms must be handed over to the DFG.

By accepting funding, the recipient agrees to

- use the grant exclusively and in a targeted manner to realise the funded project. The use and accounting of funds must conform to the relevant regulations of the DFG;
- submit progress reports on the research by the dates specified in the award letter and present financial accounts to the DFG detailing the use of funds.

The DFG expects the findings of the funded Clusters of Excellence to be made available to the public.

## **V Publication of applicant and project data**

Please note the DFG's Data Protection Notice for Research Funding, which you can access at:

[www.dfg.de/privacy\\_policy](http://www.dfg.de/privacy_policy)

If necessary, please also forward this information to those individuals whose data will be processed by the DFG due to their involvement in your project.

## Further information

All programme documents are available at:

[www.dfg.de/foerderung/programme/exzellenzstrategie/formulare\\_merkblaetter](http://www.dfg.de/foerderung/programme/exzellenzstrategie/formulare_merkblaetter)

See the following website for answers to frequently asked questions about proposal submission, explanations of individual points in the guidelines and additional programme information:

[www.dfg.de/excellence\\_strategy](http://www.dfg.de/excellence_strategy)

For details of the German federal and state governments' Excellence Strategy, see:

[www.gwk-bonn.de/en](http://www.gwk-bonn.de/en)

Please note the information on the Universities of Excellence funding line provided by the German Science and Humanities Council (Wissenschaftsrat, WR):

[www.wissenschaftsrat.de/EN/Fields-of-Activity/Competitive\\_review\\_processes/Excellence-Strategy](http://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/EN/Fields-of-Activity/Competitive_review_processes/Excellence-Strategy)

## Appendix: Examples of how to calculate the university allowance

For universities involved in several Clusters of Excellence and Clusters of Excellence involving several applicant universities, the allocation of the university allowance is based on the calculation model described below.

- If an applying university is involved in several Clusters of Excellence for which the university allowance is granted, then the Clusters of Excellence must be ranked for the purpose of calculating the allowance. In order to calculate the university allowance of an applicant university, the Cluster of Excellence in which the university is the sole applicant or which involves the smallest number of other universities as applicants is ranked first. The second and third ranking positions are assigned in the same way. Clusters of Excellence of equal rank are ranked according to the reference number (see University C below – EXC 3 and 4).



Example of a possible constellation of universities and Clusters of Excellence with ranking

	EXC 1	EXC 2	EXC 3	EXC 4	EXC 5
University A	2				1
University B	2	1			
University C	3		1	2	
University D		1			

- If several universities jointly apply for a Cluster of Excellence, the university allowance is divided among these universities. Each applicant university is allocated the amount resulting from the ranking (€1 million for first position; €750,000 for second position; €500,000 for each additional position) divided by the number of universities applying for this Cluster of Excellence.

Example including sums for the university allowance (in € million per year). When there are additional applicant universities, the proportions change proportionally.

	EXC 1	EXC 2	EXC 3	EXC 4	EXC 5	Total
University A	0.75/3				1.00/1	1.25
University B	0.75/3	1.00/2				0.75
University C	0.50/3		1.00/1	0.75/1		1.92
University D		1.00/2				0.50