

Statement



Press Conference Decisions on the Second Programme Phase of the Excellence Initiative

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'm very pleased with the great interest in the Excellence Initiative, and thus in top-level research in Germany, and I'm happy to use this opportunity to complement the words of our political leaders from the point of view of the scientific community and round off the picture.

First off, three main points:

- This second phase of the Excellence Initiative makes it clear once again: the Excellence Initiative has triggered lasting changes in the German university system and strengthened our research considerably within the international arena, and it will continue to do so — with cutting-edge research topics and innovative models for research organisation and cooperation, which would not exist without this contest.
- Today's decisions were prepared using only scientific criteria, and this is also how they were consensually taken by the Grants Committee. The scientific community greatly appreciates that our policymakers continue to adhere to this principle. After all, it is what allows us to select and support the best projects.
- The projects approved for funding today were proposed by more than one-third of all German universities. The Excellence Initiative promotes top-level research — and this top-level research is broad-based and diverse in Germany.

Regarding the process:

As you know, the reviews and decision-making preparations in the three funding lines were conducted under the leadership of the DFG for graduate schools and clusters of excellence, and under the guidance of the German Council of Science and Humanities for institutional strategies.

Graduate schools and clusters of excellence — just as a reminder — are doubly significant: on the one hand, they entail outstanding and forward-looking projects and training models as well as top-level research at the respective universities and locations — and on the other hand, they are prerequisites for institutional strategies. Without at least one graduate school and one cluster of excellence, even

an institutional strategy considered otherwise worthy of funding cannot be approved.

A novelty in the second phase of the Excellence Initiative was the competition between institutions funded since 2006 or 2007 and new applicants that had emerged from a preliminary selection in early 2011.

In the first two funding lines, 127 projects and proposals competed in the contest — 63 for graduate schools, 64 for clusters of excellence. They were submitted by a total of 46 universities. 75 proposals came from previously funded institutions; 52 were new entries.

These 127 submissions were assigned to 37 panels according to their subject areas and reviewed between November 2011 and February 2012 by international peer review panels. 457 reviewers were involved in this process. 21 percent of them were women; 87 percent were based outside Germany and contributed the all-important international comparative perspective. The largest group, about 300, came from Europe; about 130 from North America; and about 20 reviewers were from Israel, Australia and New Zealand, China, Japan, Brazil, and India.

All 127 proposals were examined individually, and each one was given an equal chance. For graduate schools, it was primarily about the qualification programme for doctoral researchers and the integration into the university's early career training model. For clusters of excellence, the primary focus was on the quality, originality and risk-taking demonstrated by the research programme.

In both lines, special attention was paid to the quality of the participating researchers and the scientific environment, along with interdisciplinarity and collaboration with other institutions, and the impact on the structure of each university. Gender equality in academia was another important criterion. And for previously funded institutions, reviewers were also interested in the extent to which the targets set in 2006 and 2007 were reached.

The recommendations made against this backdrop provided the basis for this week's discussions; first in the DFG Expert Commission, then — together with the Strategy Commission of the Council of Science and Humanities and its recommendations on institutional

strategies — in the Joint Commission of the DFG and the Council, and finally today in the Grants Committee.

Regarding the quality of the contest and the results:

Competition was very intense and very high-profile. The reviewers were impressed by the quality of most proposals — and this continued into the commissions and all the way to the Grants Committee. This was true for the renewal proposals of previously funded projects as well as the first-time entries.

Accordingly, the choices we had to make were not between “good” and “very good”, but between “very good” and “even better”.

Our shared goal was to fund as many graduate schools and clusters of excellence in this top tier as possible. To achieve this goal, we fully exhausted the funding framework. It was not possible to approve all the requested grant amounts in full, but then again, this is business as usual for us as a research funding agency.

The graduate schools and clusters of excellence thus approved were proposed by more than one-third of all German universities. Regarding the distribution across the four major scientific disciplines, there are no surprises and no significant deviations from other grant programmes, such as those of the DFG.

Furthermore, it turns out — as we already saw in the preliminary round — that those states that have been investing in their universities over many years were particularly successful. This contributes significantly to the great number of grants going to larger universities and locations that are already strong on research. But alongside them, a number of smaller universities and locations were also successful with their excellent first-time proposals. This is something I’m particularly pleased with, and, with a view towards the new states, the success of Dresden.

Regarding the proposals that were not approved: among them are also renewal applications from previously funded institutions. They are bound to experience today’s decisions as particularly severe. Yet it is the nature of a contest and of the Excellence Initiative that there are no automatisms, and that all, including the previously funded institutions, must face the competition and prevail against it.

The institutions whose grants were not renewed will receive expiration funding over a period of two years, initially up to 70 percent and then up to 40 percent of the amount awarded in the final year of the funding period. This enables these institutions to complete ongoing projects, especially those by early career researchers, and of course to raise other grants.

Our congratulations now go to all those institutions that will be able, starting in November when the funding begins, to realise their plans and projects for five years. This raises great hopes and expectations in the German research community — for these institutions, but not just for them.

Therefore allow me to take a look ahead already here and now:

So what should come after these five years and this new phase of the Excellence Initiative?

First of all, there can be no doubt, if only for the sake of reason and fairness, that even the institutions newly approved today must be given a chance at a second grant after five years — competitively, of course, and with stringent review and evaluation.

But that alone won't be enough. The momentum and dynamics of the Excellence Initiative as a whole must be perpetuated in the German academic system. And they are evident everywhere we look:

- in new structures at universities and innovative collaborations between universities and other institutions,
- in modernised university administrations,
- in many cutting-edge research topics and projects,
- and, last but not least, in numerous new jobs and positions,

none of which would exist without the Excellence Initiative.

And while I'm taking stock, let me give you a couple of numbers. At the end of 2011, more than 17,500 researchers were working at graduate schools and clusters of excellence. About one-third of them were women and about one-quarter of the research staff was from abroad — both shares that are well above the figures of the average German university. About 330 professorships were funded under the Excellence Initiative in the two funding lines, two-thirds

of them newly established ones, which is a boon not only for top-level research but also for higher education and our students.

These positive effects must be maintained and allowed to unfold further. Therefore we combine our thanks today to the federal and state governments for the resources they have made available so generously, with the hope and wish that, going forward, they may continue to offer sufficient financing in appropriate structures, in order to keep us from falling behind what we have already achieved.

The last word should go once more to our international reviewers. We invited the members of our 37 panels to take an electronic survey. Almost 90 percent of them participated. Responses by the overwhelming majority were very positive to enthusiastic. More than 93 percent thought the review process was just right, and as many as 97 percent would get involved again in the Excellence Initiative. Even the members of our commissions, all internationally recognised and well-connected, told us over and over how impressed and excited they were and are.

This perhaps shows best what the Excellence Initiative means and what we have kicked off with our decisions today.