

A new focus on excellence

When Edelgard Bulmahn, German Minister for Education and Research, first proposed in 2004 an initiative to foster an elite circle of universities with significant funds from the federal government, she drew heavy criticism.

The German federal states did not like the idea that most of their universities would get neglected in favour of a few. Their fear was that the German university system would eventually be made up of some 'ivy league' universities and a large number of scientifically irrelevant teaching colleges. Traditionally, German universities show a relatively homogeneous level of quality in research and teaching.

On the other hand, everybody seems to agree that the present university system needs urgent reforms to stay internationally competitive. In contrast to the independently funded and run Max Planck and Fraunhofer institutes, the federal state governments directly control universities, even down to administrative matters such as the appointment of new professors.

Frau Bulmahn has already tried to restructure the academic system by introducing American-style associate professorships ("junior professorships"), as young academics opting for a life in academia are mostly left without stable employment and generally uncertain career options. Unfortunately, this attempt didn't seem to have the desired effect on the career path of young scientists. Many of those professorships are not equipped with sufficient funding, in particular in the physical sciences, and tenure is still very difficult to achieve.

In a final twist, some conservative-run and traditionally independent-minded states such as Bavaria and Saxony fought this initiative as the German constitution leaves such specifics to the states. Consequently, in July 2004, the constitutional court overruled all federal regulations on junior professorships. The whole system was left to local regulations.

In a new attempt to reform the university system, the government concentrated on one of its key competencies: funding. Although Frau Bulmahn's initial proposal was widely criticized, after lengthy negotiations with the state governments a compromise was finally reached in June 2005.

From 2006 to 2011, the new proposal provides an extra 1.9 billion Euros to universities in the form of a new "Excellence Initiative". The federal government will provide 75% of this sum and the federal states the remaining part. The first round of calls closed last September, but another round is expected to take place in spring next year. The physical sciences and engineering disciplines typically receive nearly half of all federal research funds, so it is expected that these disciplines will benefit significantly from this scheme.

As a change to the original proposal, the main sum will be distributed to smaller "clusters of excellence" — interdisciplinary local research groups working under a common theme. These clusters, about 30 in total, will each receive 6.5 million Euros per year. The hope is that smaller universities stand a chance of successfully competing for these funds and that the traditional diversity of the German university system will be maintained.

In a much-welcomed move, the government lifted some of the restrictions on how the money is spent, so that funds are not only used for travel and consumables, but possibly also for buildings, professorships and even nurseries to create a more family-friendly infrastructure for researchers. Overall, the first response to this modified proposal has been very positive. Most universities are expected to take part in the first application round.

Other programmes under this excellence initiative include funding for graduate schools and, a relic of the original proposal, extended funding to 10 universities, selected by a complex review process. These additional funds can amount to up to 21 million Euros per year and will be independently managed by the universities to support specific strategic projects. Importantly, this could increase the pressure towards a stronger administrative independence of universities, similar to most international top institutions.

Of course the scientific outcome of the programme will depend on many other factors such as the current project to reform the academic degree system towards common European Bachelor and Master degrees. However, the policy reversal to put large amounts of funding into self-organized clusters of researchers is a welcomed change to the micromanagement of traditional project proposals.

There might even be a further benefit: the significant endowment of funds could provide an incentive to researchers from abroad to come to Germany for their research. Although there is still a long way to go, this initiative could present a significant step towards successfully reforming the rigid German academic system.



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