



University of Glasgow | Robert Owen Centre
for Educational Change

The German Excellence Initiative

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1. Introduction: The Breaking of a Taboo

- German „Excellence Initiative“ a national **political** reaction to global rankings
- Goals: strengthen university research; strengthen role of universities; strengthen international visibility
- Legal homogeneity and horizontal institutional diversity versus more funding for the top institutions and vertical stratification (taboo)



2. History of the Excellence Initiative

- **The compromise** between Federal Ministry and the States:
- Extra funding for 5 years in three categories: (a) **graduate schools** (ca. 40, ca. 1 million € annually), (b) **clusters of excellent research** (ca. 30, ca. 8 million € annually) (c) **institutional development concepts** (ca. 10, ca. 25 million € annually)
- Selection organised by DFG and Science Council based on (international) peer review



Shaping the process:

- A joint commission to formulate guidelines and make final funding recommendations
- A two-step selection process
- A grants commission (including political representatives) to make the final decision (from the second round onwards)



Results of the first round (2006)

	Graduate Schools	Excellence Clusters	Institutional Development Concepts
Number to be selected	Ca. 20 (out of 40)	Ca. 15 (out of 30)	Ca. 5 (out of 10)
First proposals received	135	157	27
Selected for short-list (full proposal)	39	39	10
Winners	18	18	3



- Majority of institutions shortlisted in the third category located in southern German states (Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria)
- No institution from East Germany
- Subject distribution among graduate schools: majority in engineering and life sciences
- Subject distribution of excellence clusters: majority in engineering, life sciences, informatics



Results of the second round (2007)

	Graduate Schools	Excellence Clusters	Institutional Development Concepts
Number to be selected	Ca. 22	Ca. 12	Ca. 7
New first proposals	118	123	20
Round 1 proposals carried forward	21	22	7
Selected for shortlist	44	40	8
Winners	21	20	6



- Distribution of winners in third category more varied but again over-representation of institutions located in Southern Germany (none from East Germany)
- In terms of graduate schools and excellent research clusters also more geographical variation as well as more interdisciplinary schools and clusters
- Sizeable number of cooperative projects (with other institutions, extra-university research institutes, companies)



Results of third round (2012 - 2017)

Awards:

- 11 institutional development concepts/future elite universities
- 45 graduate schools
- 43 excellent research clusters

Ongoing debates whether there will be another round after 2017. If yes, funding category „institutional development concepts“ will most likely be replaced by awards for teaching excellence.



3. Restructuring the German Higher Education Landscape

- Excellence Initiative not officially regarded as a move to introduce institutional ranking, but it was/is an attempt to differentiate the German higher education system according to a stronger vertical differentiation.
- Tensions with regard to national student mobility concerning access and/or recognition if students move from a less reputed to a highly reputed university
- Increase in competition among universities but also „Matthew effect“



- Emergence of three-dimensional view (which needs to be questioned!):
 1. National higher education systems should be more vertically stratified than before
 2. Success at the top of the system is important
 3. The „top“ no longer plays in the national league but in a global (champions) league

But what about those universities not in the top group?



- No national system can afford to cater exclusively for the „top league“ of institutions

Policy questions:

- Has the decision to introduce the Excellence Initiative been taken based on a clear understanding of the implications for re-structuring the system as a whole?
- And in which way should the system be re-structured?
- What kind of excellence are we aiming for?
- And is there room for different missions without being perceived as a loser?



4. Excellence in the Making and Side-Effects

Points of criticism:

- What is rated in the selection procedure: excellent application or proven performance?
- Graduate schools and excellence clusters can be evaluated for quality of (previous) research output but third category awards institutional management concepts. What is the relationship between excellent research and excellent management?
- What is the „unifying element“ of excellence (individuals, departments, institutions)?



Unintended side-effects:

- configuration of the higher education system as a whole had not been thought through;
- Matthew effect/resource concentration;
- effective use of overall pool of talent (broad basis) versus focus on top level only
- Damage to status and reputation of those universities who did not win or did not participate



5. Critical Discussion and Conclusions

- Political prognosis of the (global) competitiveness of German higher education identified problems.
- In terms of teaching and learning solution was seen in implementing the Bologna Process reforms
- In terms of research and innovation solution was seen in steeper stratification of the system providing top institutions with considerable extra funding.



Question:

- Is the Excellence Initiative just a new modus of competitive funding or does it imply a paradigm shift for German higher education?
- Pasternack (2007) does not (yet) see a paradigm shift but the Initiative had/has a catalytic function.
- Important factor in establishing new hierarchies
- Effects of the Initiative on overall system configuration and overall system performance still unclear



- Growing tension between performance and status makes it difficult to distinguish between reputation on the one hand and actual (proven) performance on the other (impact on validity of peer review systems)
- What might be a legitimate balance between „attributed“ status and objective performance?



Thank you for your attention.