



Volume 10. One Germany in Europe, 1989 – 2009

A Journalist Discusses the Results of the “Competition for Excellence” among Universities
(October 19, 2006)

A journalist reports on the mainly positive response to the federal government’s “Competition for Excellence.” The goal of the competition is to improve the performance of German universities by offering support to innovative courses of study, promising research groups, and leading research institutes.

Competition for Excellence

The New Research Landscape

Protein scientists from Munich, stem cell experts from Dresden, and integration researchers from Konstanz all have one thing in common right now: untroubled by the power struggles between politics and science, they are overjoyed because they just won the final round of the “competition for excellence.” But given the sums that other countries are currently pumping into science, the competition is a drop in the bucket.

Federal and state governments are making roughly 380 million Euro available annually for the award-winning graduate schools, [research] clusters, and future initiatives. But stem cell scientists alone will receive almost the same amount in the coming years in California, whose population is only half as large as Germany’s. Stanford University wants to increase its budget by approximately 3.4 billion Euro through donations. Half that sum could be mobilized in no time.

The Oft-Lamented Barrier has Fallen in Many Places

Comparative figures can also be interpreted positively: with relatively little means, the science minister and reviewers from both the German Research Foundation [*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* or DFG] and the German Council of Science and Humanities [*Wissenschaftsrat*] have had a tremendous impact on the revitalization of the research landscape. By the end of the first round, the competition had already served to noticeably hasten the universities’ crucial quest to develop their strengths and identities. No one talks about uniform, nationwide quality anymore. This delusion appears to have been disposed of once and for all.

The most important change may be that the oft-lamented barrier between university and non-university research has fallen in many places. Collaborative projects between universities and non-university institutes received especially high marks from international reviewers. Karlsruhe, the overall winner, was the most radical, merging the Helmholtz Energy Research Center and the Technical University to form the KIT, modeled after the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

2007: Even More Applicants for Even More Funds

The Kiel Excellence Cluster [*Exzellenzcluster*] for “The Ocean of the Future” inspired collaboration beyond the obstructive institutional boundaries between the Christian Albrechts University and two local Leibniz Institutes, the Institute for Marine Sciences and the Institute for World Economy. If these models catch on, the everyday routine of university-based academics will soon change for the better. If numerous regional or subject-specific collaborations come into being, they will open the doors of the ivory tower much wider than has previously been the case. Through the executive boards of these collaborative efforts, the universities – chronically strapped for cash – would assume an unprecedented influence on the money flow of all state research funds.

According to education and research minister Annette Schavan, who was in unison with DFG president Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker, the competition will be much harsher in the second round than in the first. In 2007, 1.1 billion Euro will be available, and the number of applicants will be greater because everyone who lost this year can reapply next year along with new applicants. After cuts to higher education budgets in states from Berlin to Bavaria, the universities have proven to be doubly motivated to receive some of the prize money.

Competition Brings out New Strengths

Some people see dishonesty at work in the way that politics gives with one hand and takes with the other. But the award-winning projects suggest that some ideas for the future and some interdisciplinary projects would not have developed were it not for the competition. The fact that doctors, psychologists, philosophers, mathematicians, biologists, linguists, and legal scholars have come together to form “The School of Mind and Brain” to examine the broad impact of brain research will bear fruit far beyond the external funding rankings.

The competition is also bringing out new strengths. Dresden, for example, is making great strides in becoming Germany’s center for stem cell research and regenerative medicine. A DFG research center for stem cell research, a thematically related DFG special research group, and a Max Planck Institute with an active stem cell research program already exist there. These are now being supplemented by a graduate school for biomedicine and bioengineering as well as the Excellence Cluster entitled “From Cells to Tissues to Therapies.”

Putting Forth an Utterly False and Dangerous Conclusion

Dresden also deserves special attention because it is the only winner from eastern Germany. In the coming years, the most important research policy battles will be fought there and in the northern states, which, all together, will receive only fourteen percent of first-round funding for centers of excellence. Some finance ministers are just waiting for a reason to cut back their research expenditures in order to balance their ailing budgets.

It is utterly false and dangerous to conclude that “not excellent” automatically means “second class,” and that second class does not deserve funding, but that is the indirect message of the competition. Research representatives have to succeed in convincing budget experts that there are no peaks without mountains, and that an ascent is possible. Otherwise, things could look bad for the future in northern and eastern Germany. Maybe Schleswig-Holstein’s science, economy, and transportation minister Dietrich Austermann’s angry response to the results was not only an expression of provincial egotism but also apprehension about the dangers that come along with excellence marketing.

Is the Funding Encouraging or Discouraging?

At a discussion forum this Tuesday evening in Berlin, warnings against a “new lower class” of universities were becoming audible. Federal research minister Schavan rejected such speculations as pure nonsense, but she still has to show how the federal government and federal states will help the weaker ones take advantage of their opportunities for advancement. This is a particularly important question as regards the continuation of the Competition for Excellence beyond 2011. If money flows to Munich and Karlsruhe for the next twenty years, then the overall impact of the competition could be more discouraging than encouraging.

For now, the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. The introduction of the overhead cost allowance, which is based on the Anglo-Saxon model, is one thing that has offered particular relief to academics when it comes to everyday matters. Successful scientists who effectively raise third-party funding used to have to get their universities to cover their additional related costs for personnel, administration, and equipment. This often didn’t help their popularity since it took available resources away from others. In the excellence competition, there is an automatic twenty percent overhead cost supplement. Schavan wants to expand this to apply to all research funding.

Source: Christian Schwägerl, “Exzellenzwettbewerb. Die neue Forschungslandschaft,” FAZ-NET, October 19, 2006.

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