

Distributed Excellence

A discussion paper by the German and Polish Rectors' Conferences on elements of the future research, education and innovation funding of the EU after 2020

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1. Introduction

The term „Distributed Excellence” has been used in different political, economic and social contexts for a long time. The term is discussed by the presidents/presidential representatives of the French, German and Polish University Rectors' Conferences (CPU, HRK, KRASP) in Berlin on 20 May of 2017. It was valued as a term that is de facto describing the national situation in France, Germany and Poland and in the EU as well as in the EU higher education system(s).

In Germany, for example, the term was recently used to describe the outcome of the first phase of the so-called “Excellence Initiative (ExIni)”, a funding program financed jointly by the Federal Government and the 16 German Landers between 2011 and 2017. The program initially was aimed at defining and developing a small number of world class universities in Germany that are able to compete in the leading world rankings with e.g. American and British universities. The competition foresaw the funding of doctoral schools, big sized interdisciplinary research projects and “future strategy”- concepts (colloquially referred to as “elite universities”). International peers rather than politicians selected the winners. And indeed, the performance of German universities received more visibility around the world. Yet, though a number of “elite universities” were defined, they did not distinguish themselves to a degree that would have created a clear cut first and second tier system of universities based on their research performance. Although there are obvious frontrunners, it turned out over time that a group of about 40 universities was able to apply successfully for one or two ExIni research projects or doctoral schools and to excel if not as an institution so in a certain field or discipline or with a strong group of cooperating researchers.

This observation was also confirmed by the spread of ERC grants in German universities in that period (2011-2017). More than 40 universities were able to attract at least one ERC grantee or prepare a successful applicant in its ranks without of course reaching the level e.g. of the University of Munich with about 70-80 grantees by now. Similar observations were made in France as a result of the “Initiatives d’excellence” starting in 2010. In Poland, the concept of Distributed Excellence is receiving increasingly more attention and support in discussions taking place in the context of essential structural changes in universities, and the Research University and Regional Excellence initiatives proposed in the draft new law on higher education and science.

2. Is Distributed Excellence in basic/frontier research a distinctive feature of the university system of the EU?

There are remarkable differences in the research performance and intensity inside national higher education systems. Seen from a bird’s-eye view only very few European states have universities that are able to lead in global research rankings as institutions. A big group of European universities in most member states, however, is capable to excel in certain fields of research.

Is this observation good or bad news for the EU? Positions have varied over time. There are proponents of the view that single world class institutions are the only chance for European universities and European innovation to be competitive and visible worldwide and to attract top researchers as well as the biggest private and public funders in the world (e.g. Swiss model of the two “Eidgenössische Technische Hochschulen” (ETHs) / the Stanford University - Silicon Valley model/ the “Champions League model” as a soccer allegory). Others consider the broad distribution of good institutions with some excellence spikes in the EU as the prerequisite for a fair chance of development in all of its regions. In this view, the distribution of excellence would be seen as the prerequisite for an evenly spread development of economies and societies in the EU member states. These two opposing views could be described as the lighthouse versus the swarm model and can be illustrated by a recent allegory popular in Germany: “Lighthouses or long chains of lights? (“Leuchttürme oder Lichterketten”)

3. Is Distributed Excellence a concept capable of rallying European university and research policies?

Europeans put a lot of emphasis on the necessity to achieve social and regional cohesion inside the member states as well as inside the EU in order to make the political and economic structures sustainable. Independent of economic arguments for the one or the other model this political culture in Europe makes it reasonable to use the notion of Distributed Excellence as a basic principle of European higher education and research systems and as a term able to prescribe policy goals for the future of them. The discussion on Distributed Excellence in this sense is also directly linked to issues such as the relationship between center and regions in the member states and in the EU as well as “Smart Specialization Strategies” and regional development.

The political goal of Distributed Excellence as the basis of a well-balanced strong higher education and research system in the EU rooted in all regions and member states should not be seen as a levelling instrument that is not permitting competition and processes of differentiation. Notwithstanding the longstanding cohesion policies of the EU and its member states there are indisputable differences in the capabilities to deliver excellent research and innovation as well as education results in Europe. These differences have developed historically and are subject to

varying geographical and economic starting points, to different priority setting of national and regional governments and last but not least to better or worse policies and governance.

The north-south divide and west-east divides are obvious in the EU and it is often mirrored even so with different connotations in the member states such as Germany, where there is a south-north divide and west-east divide in investment and delivery of research, innovation and teaching or e.g. in Poland with a historical west-east divide and France with a strong center-regions divide.

Distributed Excellence as a concept has to stand for policies that want to create excellence and not equality, but excellence based on a broad foundation of basic and frontier research inside the member states as well as inside the EU as a whole. How could European policy measures foster the promotion of the goal to support excellence wherever it may be in the EU?

4. Features of European Funding Programmes based on Distributed Excellence - Example: Features of an EU "Excellence Initiative" for universities

A European Excellence Initiative has been proposed in 2016 by Robert Madelin in his report on a new innovation concept for the EU to the President of the EU Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker.¹

Based on the assumption that every functioning ecosystem for innovation in the world has one or some first-class universities at its very heart, he proposed to develop a funding program for "top academic institutions to support innovation 2.0". His analysis and proposal was a big step forward in the sense that he properly analyzed the preconditions for such an initiative in a European three level system of governance (EU, MS, regions), where the EU-Commission, in particular in the area of education, has no say, but could speak up for the initiative, fund or co-fund it and work as a "convener and coach" for the MS and regions playing a very important political role. Judged from the point of view of Distributed Excellence Madelin's proposal could not deliver, as the different social and economic divides would have led to a EU competition where mainly northern and central European institutions and a smaller number of southern institutions would have had a realistic chance to excel and profit from the European funds. Many other member states would have been practically excluded with no chance to compete.

This European Excellence Initiative based on the concept of Distributed Excellence would need to give every member state willing to take part a fair chance to acquire funding in the competition without creating a "planned economy". It would be directed in the first place at those member states that will receive European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) after 2020. The participating member states would have to encourage applications from at least three different locations/regions on its territory in order to allow for competition and for opening up opportunities not only of the political center, often the capital. In addition, European and even global peers, independent from political influences in the member states, would decide on the quality of applications. This international peer review organized on the EU level would create the European surplus value for the member states involved, the regions and the national science communities. The international peers could come to quality judgements independently of national interest groups. The peer review would have to be organized by a consortium of several independent European research funding agencies combining experience of all parts of the EU.

Finally, the funding program would have to allow for different sizes of projects – collaborative research projects of universities/ non-university sector and where applicable of industry/society as

¹ Robert Madelin and David Ringrose (ed.): Opportunity now: Europe's mission to innovate. European Union 2016; chap 7: Developing Top Academic Institutions to support Innovation 2.0, p. 75ff.

well as smaller projects such as research labs centered around one principal investigator (PI) and his/her team or doctoral schools. The measure stick of the international peers would have to be excellence in a certain member state, but in addition oriented at European and world excellence standards. The funding of the peer review process would be provided by the EU Framework Program for Research and Innovation, whereas the funding of the projects could be based on joint funding of ESIF of the EU and national as well as regional funds. A topping up of these funds via the framework program for research and innovation would make investments attractive for the member states and regions.

Cross-border cooperation in the projects would be permitted, but not obligatory and should be driven by quality and sustainability considerations. Funding would have to be provided for a longer period of 7 to 10 years with mid-term reviews. This program would help to develop the pockets of excellence in all member states and regions that decide to participate in the competition and would widen the opportunity of participation of all member states in excellence based programs funded or co-funded by the EU or by multilaterally financed.