



# Basic funding instead of project competition

## Theses for a learning manifesto

Research and teaching in Germany are predominantly publicly funded. In recent decades, however, the basic public funding or basic funding of higher education institutions and non-university research institutions (AUF) has been increasingly eroded and replaced by project funding, which also comes largely from the public purse. According to a calculation by the German Council of Science and Humanities, almost 46 per cent of higher education institutions' research budgets now come from "third-party funding", while around 15 per cent of public funding for AUFs is in the form of project funding.

Project funding can create flexibility and facilitate co-operation with business and political practice in applied subjects. However, its recent massive expansion creates problems for employment relationships and for the relationship between research and teaching, but also for academic freedom, curiosity, willingness to take risks and conscientiousness. These problems are now widely recognised. However, convincing solutions are rare. We would like to put forward the main points of criticism and possible solutions for discussion in order to prepare the ground for urgently needed reforms:

### A. Problem definitions

1. **The primacy of project funding creates false incentives and favours actors who specialise in the strategic pursuit of formal goals** (gaming the system). When the acquisition of project funding becomes a central criterion of success for individuals and institutions, "predatory communities", pseudo-collaborations and, in extreme cases, the mere pretence of research are also encouraged. The acquisition of research funding is often confused with research success. For actors who strategically exploit this, the means becomes an end in itself.
2. **Project funding on the current scale diverts scientific energy from research itself and its results to the acquisition of research funding.** A core aspect of this problem is the amount of working time that goes into the mere preparation and assessment of proposals and the administration of approved projects. As the approval rates are low - currently less than 30 per cent at the German Research Foundation (DFG) and less than

15 per cent at the European Research Council (ERC) - proposal work often simply ends up in the wastepaper basket.

3. **The current regulations on project funding create and justify masses of fixed-term employment in academia.** The lack of planning security damages or destroys the CVs of many participants and severely restricts their scientific freedom and time horizons. Similar to fixed-term employees who are financed from the budget, project staff remain dependent on their (usually professorial) superiors. In addition, the form of the project limits them to certain content.
4. **The preparation of project applications and the implementation of approved projects create bottlenecks for science support staff at higher education institutions and research institutions.** Administrative tasks (e.g. personnel measures, financial planning, controlling) have increased considerably due to the increase in project funding and rising demands from funding bodies. Given the lack of basic funding, this cannot be compensated for by increasing staff numbers or by making savings elsewhere. Overloads and delays, for example in recruitment processes, are the result.
5. **The instability of project funding combined with the simultaneous underfunding of higher education institutions also threatens the maintenance of physical infrastructure.** One important example is the dilapidated state of university buildings; the German Council of Science and Humanities estimates the current refurbishment backlog for the higher education sector alone (excluding AUF) at 60 billion euros, while the Association of University Chancellors puts the figure at 74 billion euros. Another problem is that there is the lack of permanent and qualified staff to operate existing facilities. At the same time, equipment and infrastructure are procured and set up for temporary projects, which end up in the equipment graveyard at the end of the project and cannot be passed on to other universities or AUFs.
6. **The importance of project funding suggests that individuals and institutions systematically favour research and the acquisition of research funding over teaching.** While the federal and state governments are cautiously attempting to counteract this by including graduation figures and the like in target agreements with the universities, the latter still often are existentially dependent on large collaborative research projects in order to cope with rising costs and not fall back into the second tier. In appointment procedures, too, the "acquired" third-party funds usually count for much more than, for example, evidence of high teaching quality. The damage to future generations of scientists and academics is still difficult to assess.
7. **The project format and the undifferentiated modalities of project application tend to make certain disciplinary cultures and research styles the standard for all.** Formats such as Collaborative Research Centres and Clusters of Excellence take little account of

the fact that the role of large empirical studies, collaborative research or time-limited funding requirements vary greatly from one discipline to another. Conversely, formats such as long-term individual empirical studies or the establishment of experimental laboratories have no place in the system. If project funding continues to dominate, this will lead to scientific monocultures and may promote irrelevant working methods and forms of collaboration; over time, the scientific schools whose working methods best suit to the funding organisation also risk becoming dominant within the disciplines.

8. **Project operations in Germany are the result of a problematic relationship between the federal and state governments in funding the higher education sector.** The federal government prefers to use its large financial resources in the form of project funding; it has only recently begun to finance long-term special programmes such as the "Pact for the Future of Teaching and Learning", which was adopted in 2019. In the case of the "Pact for Research and Innovation", which will be renewed in 2023, the balance is mixed, since the annual increases guaranteed by the Pact allow for regular employment at the AUF on the one hand, but also flow into the DFG's project business on the other. The federal states, which are primarily responsible for the basic funding of universities, are limited in their financial resources. They therefore have a convenient excuse if they fail to fulfil their basic guarantee obligations. The complexity of the funding structure also makes corrections difficult.

## B. Solution approaches

9. **The pattern of projects and fixed-term contracts must be replaced by the principle of permanent employment and free scientific collaboration.** "Projects" (including any agreed roles of instruction and responsibility) would then no longer be the context for fixed-term employment relationships, but could be defined as collaborations between academic staff for joint research purposes that are limited in time and scope. In such a reorganisation, it would be important for academic staff to receive research funding as soon as they have completed their doctorate and not only when they become professors, so that old power hierarchies are not cemented and reproduced. An open, transparent and fair distribution of research funding for all those working in research is necessary.
10. **The funds that large funding institutions such as the DFG receive or that the federal and state governments tender for research and teaching on a project basis must be largely channelled back into the basic funding of the higher education sector and research institutions.** Part of this return can also consist of the institutions changing their character and funding permanent research centres and contexts, for example. The high proportion of public project funding for AUFs also needs to be critically examined as to its appropriateness.

11. **The core task of central funding institutions remains to temporarily support particularly financially intensive research.** All projects whose financial requirements (for equipment, surveys, data processing, etc.) exceed the basic funds that can be used cooperatively could be considered; the well-developed infrastructures of the DFG and other funding institutions can continue to be used for applications and reviews.
12. **Large temporary staffing needs may only continue to be handled in the form of projects under certain conditions.** The staff in question should either already be employed on a permanent basis (and have the possibility of being "seconded" to projects), or hold doctoral positions that allow sufficient time to complete a doctorate. Finally, pool solutions are also conceivable in high-volume subjects and research areas, where new project funds are repeatedly acquired to finance permanent positions. In both cases, public, private and civil society organisations would continue to have sufficient opportunities to promote targeted research in important fields (such as climate change, vaccine development or combating racism).
13. **The division of responsibilities between the federal and state governments in higher education funding, which has already been significantly shifted with the "Treaty for the Future of Teaching and Learning", must also be redefined in the area of research:** The federal government must assume joint responsibility for the permanent and not merely the temporary funding of research at higher education institutions.

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