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New EUA report analyses "Excellence" funding schemes in Europe and their impact on universities

The European University Association has today (12 December) published a new report that examines "excellence schemes", public funding schemes which have as their main objective the fostering of excellence in the university sector, and their impact on universities in Europe.

Entitled 'Funding for excellence', it is the first in a series of three thematic reports that will outline many of the key findings of the EUA-led DEFINE project* which analyses the impact of funding efficiency measures on universities (the next two reports will focus on mergers/concentration measures and performance-based funding). The new report takes into account excellence schemes that have been introduced in different countries across Europe but looked more closely at 10 schemes. It also includes a series of project recommendations for policy makers and higher education institutions which are based on data collection, case studies, site visits and focus groups which have been carried out/collected in the framework of the DEFINE project.

The report begins by looking at the characteristics, rationale and objectives behind the development of the many schemes that have been introduced in Europe. Whilst the aims of excellence schemes may include for example enhancing international visibility or competitiveness, improving research and/or teaching quality, it notes that there is also often an ambition behind such schemes to enhance funding efficiency. The report explains that it is important that excellence schemes should not be considered in isolation from the overall funding framework in a system, and should represent additional funding for universities, and not take away basic funding granted to universities.

Excellence schemes require significant administrative capacities both at the level of the public authorities and/or funding councils, as well as at the level of the participating higher education institutions. The report explains that it is important for such schemes to have clear objectives and criteria for selection, transparency in all processes, and for administrative procedures to be kept as simple as possible.

In terms of the impact of such schemes on universities, the report finds that large scale initiatives (such as the ones in Germany, France and Spain) can act as a driver for "institutional profiling" but there is also evidence of the impact on institutional governance and organisational restructuring. Institutions participating in such schemes can benefit for example from enhanced visibility and recruitment of high quality staff, contributing to raising the quality of research. The report also shows the need to preserve an adequate balance between research and education and the different academic disciplines.

The report notes that university leadership has a key role to play: in terms of assessing the opportunity for the institution to take part in such schemes; evaluating related costs and benefits; anticipating the possible effects on the university's internal balance and taking strategic action in response to this.

Given that the timescale of excellence schemes is often limited, the report also highlights that funders should establish an "exit strategy" to ensure the sustainability of the outcomes achieved in the system when the scheme is brought to an end, for instance by integrating funding into the regular funding mechanisms. At institutional level, the report recommends that university leadership should also consider and establish such an exit strategy allowing the university to maintain the new level of activities after the excellence scheme funding comes to an end.

**DEFINE is a 2.5-year project (autumn 2012-spring 2015) run by EUA in collaboration with CIPES, the Centre for Research in Higher Education Policies (Portugal), and the Universities of Oxford (UK), Aalto (Finland) and Erlangen-Nuremberg (Germany), and the Copenhagen Business School (Denmark). The project is co-funded by the European Commission under the Lifelong Learning Programme.*

The full report can be downloaded [here](#).

Ends.

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The European University Association, as the representative organisation of both the European universities and the national rectors' conferences, is the main voice of the higher education community in Europe. EUA's mission is to promote the development of a coherent system of European higher education and research.

Notes to editors

- More information on the DEFINE project can be found here: www.eua.be/define
- Through its Public Funding Observatory, EUA also monitors the evolution of public funding to European higher education institutions. The latest report from October 2014, is published together with an interactive online tool which provides a range of updated data for European higher education systems. The observatory analyses both the evolution of funding over the last year (2013-2014) and longer-term developments in university funding since 2008, also taking into account the impact of inflation, changes in student numbers, and the evolution in terms of countries' gross domestic product. More information is available here <http://www.eua.be/eua-work-and-policy-area/governance-autonomy-and-funding/public-funding-observatory-tool.aspx>