

Data show “excellence initiative” was a massive failure – help stop it

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Around 2005, German politicians decided on a plan to circumvent a newly created amendment to the German constitution that prevents federal funds from supporting state-owned institutions such as universities. Given the unanimous support of R&D among federal parties and the booming economy, federal politicians only needed some way to frame the plan that would not immediately call state politicians to action and challenge the law in a constitutional court*.

The result of these deliberations was a PR stunt they dubbed the “excellence initiative”, a neoliberal scheme purporting to bring much-needed competition to a way too egalitarian (and vastly underfunded) university landscape. Not [unlike in other areas](#) where neoliberalism rules with the accompanying wishful thinking that competition will magically make everything a better place, the German university system today knows only one class of winners in a sea of losers: administrations.

[Employment statistics](#) show that administrative staff increased by 17% from 2005 to 2012, while permanent scientist positions increased only by 0.04%. Total teaching staff did not match the increase in students of 25% and the precariously employed scientists increased by a whopping 50%: for every permanent scientific position, 10 fixed term positions were created, increasing the already unhealthy competition among the academic precariat to insane levels.

Even when trying to evaluate the scientific effects of the initiative, the data come up short. A recent [independent analysis](#) by Nature Publishing Group revealed that the increased scientific performance of the “excellent” universities was matched by a corresponding increase in the “non-excellent” universities which did not receive these funds.

In summary, the available data indicate that the “Excellence Initiative” was without any tangible effect scientifically, worsened job prospects to an extent that now only the intellectually challenged would pursue a career in academia, exacerbated the [socioeconomic drivers](#) behind the replication crisis and bloated administrations.

This year, it was decided to extend this catastrophe for German universities.

Slowly, resistance is forming. There now is a [petition](#) that everyone should sign who wants to stop neoliberal ideologies from continuing to poison academia, no matter in what country. If we can stop this madness in Germany, there is hope it can be stopped in other countries as well.

* This is my recollection of the public account of the circumstances leading up to the Excellence Initiative as it was concordantly presented by the following state and federal politicians, speaking at the GAIN Meeting in Boston in [2010](#):

- Parlamentarischer Staatssekretär **Thomas Rachel**, MdB, Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, [CDU](#)
- Staatsminister Dr. **Wolfgang Heubisch**, Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Wissenschaft, Forschung u. Kunst, [FDP](#)
- **Krista Sager**, MdB, [B90/Grüne](#)