The Future of German Science Funding

In April of this year, Germany’s minister of justice Brigitte Zypries proposed that as part of a reform of Germany’s federal system, science funding in Germany should be streamlined. Currently, the Länder (states) take principal responsibility for higher education institutions, whereas higher education infrastructure, non-university research institutions, and Germany’s major research funding organization, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), are financed jointly by the federal and Länder governments. Under the new proposal, the Länder would take sole responsibility for higher education institutions, including their infrastructure, whereas the federal government would fund the DFG and most non-university research institutions.

Elegant as this proposal may seem, it met resolute opposition from the affected research institutions and the Länder ministers of science. The opponents fear a decline in higher education investments in most Länder, less reliable science funding, and more political influence on science. Public discussions have waned for the moment while an interparliamentary commission deliberates overall reform of the federal system. But scientists and their representatives must remain on guard. To the commission, simple solutions for seemingly marginal problems—such as science policy, which is but a minor topic among such major ones as legislation and the tax system—might seem attractive. Thus, it is time to ask what is at stake for science in Germany.

The joint funding system for higher education infrastructure proved effective during German unification, when 67 institutions in the former East Germany were newly founded or renovated extensively. For many years, German higher education institutions have seen a rate of capital investment close to the average for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Federal and Länder governments have jointly provided for good-quality infrastructure even at smaller, less renowned institutions. The system is less good, however, at encouraging competition across Länder boundaries. It also tends to discourage universities from taking responsibility for their real estate. And funding procedures are cumbersome and overburdened with detailed maintenance projects of limited strategic interest.

Reform of this part of the system is thus overdue. But it is far from clear that the proposed “disentanglement” will improve the situation. In the present system, federal cofunding provides leverage in funding decisions by those Länder that pursue a growth-oriented higher education strategy, as, for example, Saxony has done in the past decade. In a disentangled system, this opportunity would be lost. Also, Länder governments are primarily responsible to their regional constituencies and are unlikely to accord superior importance to the overall quality and coherence of the higher education infrastructure in Germany. These are, however, assets that any reform must strive to preserve. Any reform should also simplify procedures, improve support for centers of excellence according to their strategic relevance irrespective of Länder boundaries, and strengthen the role of the universities.

Opportunities and threats are equally balanced in the case of non-university research institutions. The sharing of responsibility between federal and Länder governments has resulted in high and reliable levels of institutional funding in recent decades, enabling, for example, the Max Planck Society to pursue promising research questions in biophysics, biochemistry, or evolutionary biology without having to rely on short-term grants. The opportunity to do so provides an incentive for scientists from abroad to relocate to Germany. Cooperative federalism also guarantees maximum autonomy for the research organizations, because direct political influence is buffered by a division of power.

But there is another side to the coin. Research funding must concentrate on excellent and innovative institutions and encourage institutional flexibility and competition across organizational and Länder boundaries. Because of the potential consequences for the regional distribution of scientific institutions, this is difficult to put into practice when the federal government and 16 Länder have to reach a consensus in every instance. Any reform has to improve the efficiency of research funding through a new balance of cooperation and competition. At the same time, it should secure the level of institutional funding for non-university research organizations that is necessary for them to remain competitive at an international level and safeguard their autonomy against political influences.

If the present debate on disentanglement leads to a reform that meets these conditions, it is welcome. But it is not a good idea to scrap a tried and tested system for purely political reasons if no one has a vision for what is to follow. Therefore, scientists and their institutions must have a voice in the constitutional commission.

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