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Decision processes at DFG

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Special Seminar at AIP

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What is DFG?

- Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft: www.dfg.de
≈ German Science Foundation (all pages also in English)
- Legal Construction: Association under private law (“eingetragener Verein”)
- Members = research universities & institutes in Germany, scientific associations, academies
- Funded mainly by federal government & states; 2.8 G€ in 2014
- but voting system and procedural regulations set up for independence of science-driven decisions.
- Support ranges from single travel grants to large institute clusters, but backbone is “individual grants programme”.

DFG – Fachkollegien (Review Boards)

- For each subject area: Elected Review Boards
 - responsible for (or involved in) the evaluation of all grant proposals
 - monitor review process to ensure application of uniform standards
 - advisory role for future development of DFG funding programme.
- Astrophysics is its own subject area (incl. solar system, also astroparticle physics when focussing on source properties)
- Current period (2012–2016): 5 elected members (A. Burkert, H. Rauer, S. Dreizler, J. Büchner, L. Wisotzki)
- Next period: 6 Members
- All PhD scientists at DFG member institutions may vote.

From Proposal to Grant Allocation

Three step process for Individual Grants:

1. Incoming proposals are sent to external referees (typically 2) selected by the responsible person at DFG Head Office. Referees are requested to give recommendations for/against funding on scientific grounds only (no financial constraints).
2. Proposals and written reports by external referees are evaluated in face-to-face meeting of Review Board, 4 x per year. Review Board passes funding recommendations, including financial boundary conditions (XX% of requested funds may be allocated).
3. Final decision is made by “Grants Committee” (*Hauptausschuss*), nearly always following recommendations of Review Board (except for very large coordinated funding schemes: Priority Programmes, Collaborative Research Centres)

External Proposal Review I

- 2 (clearly) positive reports are normally **necessary** for success.
- but not **sufficient**: Sometimes, 80% of the reviews come up with positive funding recommendation.
- On the other hand, not every bit of criticism automatically leads to proposal rejection → evaluation by Review Board
- Very broad range of quality of external reviews (including such that are completely useless)
- Reviews are provided verbatim to proposers in case of rejection or when containing information to be passed.

External Proposal Review II:

- Ideally a report should contain:
 - Assessment of strengths but also weaknesses, minor and major
 - Clearly indicating the relative importance of evaluated aspects
 - Comments on chances of success (e.g., international competition)
 - for previously rejected & resubmitted proposal: Evaluation of improvements!
- Most common shortcomings in external DFG referee reports:
 - Too much space wasted on *explaining* the proposal (to whom?)
 - Only global judgement, no individual strengths / weaknesses assessment.
 - Report mentions several critical points, but then suddenly ends with funding recommendation.
- Such reports are a BIG Problem for the Review Board!
 - Re-assessment of proposal by Board members: Heavy additional workload!
 - expertise in Board may be marginal

Oversubscription

- Funding line given by DFG (revised at each meeting)
→ oversubscription built into the system!
- requested in Astrophysics (10/2014 – 07/2015): 18.7 M€
30% funding quota: 5.6 M€
- Main job of Review Board: Weighing the external reports and formulating a final recommendation, knowing the quota.
- This necessarily includes cases where Review Board departs from recommendations by external referees,
 - because of too many positive reports,
 - because of disagreement with external report.

Elections 2015

- Researchers eligible to vote will receive voting documentation from their institution "before the beginning of the voting period".
- 16 candidates for 6 slots in Astronomy & Astrophysics
- Voting period for online ballot submission:
Monday, 26 October 2015, 2:00 PM to
Monday, 23 November 2015, 2:00 PM
- Please participate and vote!