



Brussels News Update

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Commission too Top-Down on Research

Too much focus is being placed on increasing top-down co-ordination of research activities and centrally managed networks, according to the first responses to a Commission consultation on the European Research Area (ERA).

The Commission's Green Paper on new perspectives for the ERA, launched a public debate on how to overcome persistent barriers to building a true ERA and put an end to the fragmentation and duplication of research. A Portuguese Presidency conference from 8-10 October will see the Commission lay out the results of the consultation, but some clear messages have already come from stakeholders.

Heads of European Research Councils (EUROHORCs) and the European Science Foundation (ESF) say that if the Commission is serious about establishing a comprehensive ERA, "it needs to engage and focus more on the national research funding and performing organisations, the private sector, and the non-European research systems for the development of the ERA".

"The Commission's analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the European Research System (ERS) concentrates too much on the perspective of the Commission's role and on that of governments and intergovernmental structures. It ignores the role of other stakeholders, such as the national research funding and research performing organisations, as well as other European bodies, the private sector, and, finally, non-European research systems."

"The Commission needs to put more money into basic research through programmes such as the ERC, to reduce its bureaucracy for these programmes, and to put some pressure on its member states to remove the still abundant barriers to the mobility of researchers," state EUROHORCs and ESF.

The League of European Research Universities (LERU) criticised the Green Paper as building too strongly on the existing framework and not questioning strongly the prior assumptions on which current policy and practice are based.

LERU questions the need for far reaching European-level coordination of national and regional programmes and activities which it says would make the delivery difficult, clumsy and ineffectual and tend to stifle bottom-up initiatives.

LERU is also sceptical about the EU's penchant for networks arguing that networking between groups with similar interest is already omnipresent but that to be successful, collaboration must be dynamic and flexible and research networks need to be able to modify their activities in response to changing needs."

The European Platform of Women Scientists reiterates that "consideration of gender is essential. Gender diversity in research and research leadership renders research more creative, and will therefore ultimately result in a higher likeliness of innovation."

Lack of gender awareness, persistent gender stereotypes, predominantly male decision-making bodies, and insufficient network support with respect to women's career advancement are just some of the reasons for women's under-representation in science and research and in reaching the top decision-making level. Other key elements are the lack of transparency in recruitment procedures, gate-keeping and the operation of 'old boys networks' to which women often do not have access.

Next steps:

- 8-10 October 2007: A conference on the consultation's results.
- Early 2008: Commission to propose new initiatives for ERA.

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/science/commission-view-european-research-narrow/article-166579> and <http://www.euractiv.com/en/science/interview-europe-far-securing-gender-balance-science-jobs/article-166422>

Commission: European Research Area: http://ec.europa.eu/research/era/index_en.html

ERC Recommendations on the ERA

'Europe's recent investments are (still) insufficient, and fragmentation calls for the development of new synergies and other innovative initiatives' says the Scientific Council of the European Research Council (ERC). 'We must continue to ramp up private and public research investments, provide the necessary research infrastructures, extensively reform the education sector (in particular the university systems) and facilitate Masters-level, doctoral and postdoctoral training.'

In a paper on the ERA, the Scientific Council has recommended that the Commission:

- implement fully and properly an autonomous ERC according to the established legislation;
- extend the principles of autonomous management and governance to other areas;
- increase research resources in Europe;
- improve the efficiency and complementarity of European research and training schemes and promote their synergies with robust national programmes;
- improve the connections between frontier research and innovation.

The paper calls for the ERC's annual budget of €1.7 billion to be doubled at the start of the next framework programme, and a major effort should be made to channel the EU's Structural Funds into infrastructure for research. The Commission should also significantly increase the budget for investment in critical research infrastructures.

The paper also states that, 'there is still some way to go before the ERC operates with the appropriate autonomy' and suggests that if the current model does not work out an alternative long-term solution will need to be agreed following the ERC's mid-term review.

The Scientific Council also recommends improved efficiency and complementarity between European research and training schemes, and the promotion of synergies with strong national programmes. This could be done by introducing an excellence-based postdoctoral fellowship programme free of rigid mobility requirements, or by supporting programmes run successfully by other organisations, such as the European Molecular Biology Organisation (EMBO). An Erasmus scheme for PhD students would be one possibility.

Finally, the paper calls for closer links between frontier research, as funded by the ERC, and innovation. 'Successful translation cannot rely on 'end-of-pipe' solutions,' it states. The Scientific Council recommends following the example of the US, which has placed students well trained in basic research laboratories into industry and R&D labs. PhD theses involving both a basic research institution and an industrial lab could also receive EU support, the paper suggests.

Cordis News :

http://cordis.europa.eu/fetch?CALLER=EN_NEWS_FP7&ACTION=D&DOC=18&CAT=NEWS&QUERY=1190642297750&RCN=28287

ERC Recommendations:

http://erc.europa.eu/pdf/scc_reflections_era_greenpaper_310807_erc_format_fck2_en.pdf

ERA Conference 8-10 October:

http://ec.europa.eu/research/conferences/2007/fst/index_en.htm

COST Budget Increase in FP7

COST, the European Cooperation in Science and Technology, will continue to be managed by the European Science Foundation (ESF) under the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) with a 250% budget increase.

'The contract and the increase in funding is indeed a strong vote of confidence towards the ESF-COST cooperation,' said Dr Martin Grabert, Director of the COST Office. 'With this contract, we can truly capitalise on previous successes. '

The bigger budget will allow COST to expand its activities and boost support for both the scientific and technical committees and the COST Actions (networks of researchers).

A recent independent review of the Commission-ESF COST contract for FP6 noted the high levels of satisfaction among users of COST and concluded that the switchover from the COST Action managed by the European Commission to the COST Office run by the ESF had been largely successful.

Established in 1971, COST is now used by researchers in 35 European countries to cooperate in common research projects supported by national funds.

Cordis News:

http://cordis.europa.eu/fetch?CALLER=EN_NEWS_FP7&ACTION=D&DOC=9&CAT=NEWS&QUERY=1189153079113&RCN=28148

COST: <http://www.cost.esf.org/>

WHO Report on Children's Exposure to Chemicals

In its most comprehensive study yet on the topic, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has stressed the need for more research on children's exposure to chemicals, arguing that it may be the origin of cancer, heart disease and chronic respiratory disease later in life.

"Air and water contaminants, pesticides in food, lead in soil, as well many other environmental threats which alter the delicate organism of a growing child may cause or worsen disease and

induce developmental problems," states the WHO report highlighting children's vulnerability to exposure to harmful chemicals at different stages of development.

The report is described as the most comprehensive work yet undertaken on the scientific principles to be considered in assessing health risks in children associated with exposure to chemicals. These principles are expected to help researchers, policy-makers and the health sector design improved child-protection risk assessments and tailored interventions.

According to the WHO, the stage in a child's development when exposure occurs may be just as important as the magnitude of the exposure. The organisation states that evidence suggests an increased risk of diseases, such as cancer and heart disease, in adults, that is partly due to exposure to certain environmental chemicals during childhood.

The European Environment & Health Action Plan 2004-2010 puts the emphasis on the most vulnerable groups, particularly children, and highlights the need to develop a good information base, including a coordinated approach and more research into human biomonitoring (measuring pollutants in human tissues and fluids).

The EU law on chemicals REACH entered into force on 1 July 2007. It changes the way chemicals are approved in Europe, placing the burden on businesses to prove their products are safe before they can be placed on the market.

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/environment/relaunches-controversy-children-exposure-chemicals/article-166009>

Commission communication: Mid Term Review of the European Environment and Health Action Plan http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2007/com2007_0314en01.pdf

World Health Organisation: Principles for Evaluating Health Risks in Children Associated with Exposure to Chemicals http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2006/924157237X_eng.pdf

'Wake-up Call' on Energy Savings

With sustained economic growth, the rising demand for travel, homes and leisure in the developed world has led to a 14% increase in energy-use and related CO2 emissions since 1990, the International Energy Agency (IEA) has warned in a new report.

The report says that both final energy-use and overall CO2 emissions each increased by 14% between 1990 (Kyoto protocol reference year) and 2004 in the 26 IEA member countries. Moreover, it says the rate of energy-savings improvements has actually slowed down since the 1970s and the first oil shock. "Had the earlier rate been sustained, there would have been almost no increase in energy consumption in the IEA," the agency said.

At EU level, the Commission has made energy savings one of its key priorities. In an action plan endorsed by the 27 heads of state and governments in March 2007, Europe has agreed to cut its energy consumption by 20% by 2020.

"The good news is that there is still substantial scope for cost-effective energy efficiency improvements in buildings, appliances, industry and transport," said Nobuo Tanaka, executive director of the IEA, presenting the report at the G8 meeting in Berlin. "The bad news is we need to move much faster in realising this potential."

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/energy/iea-sounds-wake-call-energy-savings/article-166608>

IEA (Press release): Energy Use in the New Millennium: Trends in IEA Countries: http://www.iea.org/Textbase/press/pressdetail.asp?PRESS_REL_ID=235

Renewables - EU's 'Most Dynamic' Industries

Europe can easily achieve a 20% share for renewables in its energy mix, nuclear can be phased out and second-generation biofuels technologies will arrive in time to meet bioenergy targets sustainably, according to Oliver Schäfer, of the European Renewable Energy Council.

With the Commission preparing legislative proposals to increase the share of renewables in the EU's energy mix, and growth in renewable energies such as solar power likely to continue, Oliver Schäfer is confident that the EU will honour the commitments made by their heads of state in March.

Schäfer expects from the Commission "a directive Proposal that contains a breakdown of the 20% target into national targets. One option for doing that could be to share the target equally among the member states."

But member states have already suggested that the proposal should take into account "different national circumstances, starting points and potentials".

The renewables debate also touches on issues of energy security. In June, the International Energy Agency (IEA) urged Germany not to phase out nuclear too quickly, as this would have "significant impacts on energy security, economic efficiency and environmental sustainability".

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/energy/interview-renewables-eu-dynamic-industries/article-166227>

German Climate Plan

The German government has gone far beyond the recent EU agreement for a 20% cut in greenhouses gases (GHG) by 2020, and pledged up to 36% less CO₂ emissions by 2020 compared with 1990 levels, on 24 August the German government agreed an ambitious energy and climate plan. But critics say that it is too costly and will fail to meet its goals.

Boosting renewables

The plan foresees an increase in the share of electricity produced from renewable energies to 25-30% by 2020 with a 14% share of renewables for home heating.

Renewables stood at 5.8% of the energy mix in 2006, slightly below the EU average of 6%.

Energy efficiency

The energy efficiency of buildings is set to improve 30% by 2008, and another 30% by 2012 with €2.6 billion in government subsidies to homeowners in 2008.

Industry is also concerned about rising costs, citing an economics ministry analysis that put the cost of the climate and energy plan at €70bn before energy-efficiency savings are taken into account. The government has put the figure much lower at €8bn, and predicts that energy efficiency improvements will eventually save €13bn.

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/climate-change/german-climate-plan-gets-mixed-reviews/article-166113>

'YouTube for scientists'

SciVee aims to help scientists create and share content on a single internet portal, enabling worldwide exposure of publications and encouraging researchers to assess their peers' work. The site allows scientists to upload their technical papers and a podcast videos in which authors explain their papers' results.

Jointly operated by three US partners - the Public Library of Science (PLoS), the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the San Diego Supercomputer Center (SDSC) - "SciVee is about the free and widespread dissemination and comprehension of science," explains the portal. 'Created by scientist for scientists', it also aims to facilitate the creation of science communities around specific issues, articles and keywords and promises more exposure for scientists' publications.

With rapid advances in scientific research, the European Commission has set bridging science and society as one of its priorities. Communicating science - bridging scientists, policymakers and citizens - to foster public engagement and build trust in scientific progress, was recently qualified by the Commission's own research advisory board as 'crucial' for transforming more research into innovation.

The Commission also adopted a Communication in February 2007, proposing a series of EU-level measures to support new ways of promoting better access to information online and to preserve research results in digital format for future generations.

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/science/youtube-scientists-link-researchers-worldwide/article-166330>

SciVee: <http://www.scivee.tv/>

Commission: Communicating research: <http://ec.europa.eu/research/science-society/index.cfm?fuseaction=public.topic&id=35>

Commission Communication on scientific information in the digital age http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2007/com2007_0056en01.pdf

