

9.5.2011

Response of the Academy of Finland to the Commission Green Paper on a Common Strategic Framework for future EU Research and Innovation Funding

The Academy of Finland (AoF) welcomes the opportunity to comment the ideas presented in the EU Commission Green Paper on a Common Strategic Framework for future EU Research and Innovation Funding. The AoF supports the Green paper's leading principle of bringing the key EU funded research, technology and innovation programmes under one framework and simplify access to EU RDI funding. The Green paper discusses several important issues. In its' response to the consultation the AoF wants to stress the following aspects:

Quality as the primary criteria for funding, EU RDI funding should be complemented from other sources

It is of great importance that high scientific and technological quality standards are maintained as the backbone of the funding criteria of the EU RDI funding programmes. This must not be compromised under any circumstances.

Raising the scientific, technological and innovation capacity and potential of all Member States is important. However, this should be in the scope of the structural funds and not of the EU RDI programmes.

Research within the next RDI funding programme should complement national research activities. Its focus should be on promoting projects that cannot be implemented at a national level and that, by creating synergies, serve joint European interests.

Balance of bottom-up and top down activities

It is essential to find a balance between policy-driven (top-down) and science-driven (bottom-up) research activities. ERAB's suggestion¹ of allocating 50% of EC research funding to frontier, high-risk research and development is a good guideline for the new EU RDI funding programme.

EU funding must be provided both for scientific research based on the ideas and expertise of researchers, and for research stemming from the need to tackle grand societal challenges. The interim evaluation panel of FP7 suggested a threefold approach, where researchers, industry and civil society actors set the FP research agenda. This is well worth considering.

Cooperation between different actors is essential for success in the long run and for the application of research results in Europe. The competencies of conducting successfully both high quality scientific research and flourishing research based entrepreneurship do not often co-exist in the one and same group. Mobility of expertise and knowledge between different sectors is of crucial importance and the EU RDI funding programmes should continue emphasising this importance.

¹ "Preparing Europe for a New Renaissance", ERAB 2009

9.5.2011

Whether top-down or bottom-up, moving to ever larger project entities increases the administrative and managerial burden of the beneficiaries. Large projects or programmes involve a great amount of coordination and other support services, which the smaller or medium sized actors may not be able to carry out. This could lead to an undesirable situation that the coordination responsibilities accumulate only to a restricted group of actors.

ERC

The ERC has proven to be a great success in supporting unbound researcher initiated research ideas of world class. The ERC's role should be strengthened in future funding configurations. The significance of individual researchers to the innovation system cannot be over-emphasised. Availability of the brightest human potential is crucial in boosting and improving the quality of scientific research, and thus responding to the challenges that lie ahead.

The ERC's focus should be on researcher's careers rather than on collaborative projects. In this respect ERC could think of bridging the gap between the Starting Grants and the Advanced Grants. The ERC should stay focused on high quality and innovative basic science and should not scatter the concept by inventing new types of calls every year. A measure of regularity and predictability in the timing and organisation of calls is essential for researchers planning their careers ahead.

As the ERC has proven to be an excellent and lucrative funding "instrument", the best practice modus operandi of the ERC should be replicated in appropriate parts of the new EU RDI funding programme.

Grand Challenges

The grand societal challenges of our day require serious attention in RDI. The grand challenges should be tackled by replacing the current FP7 thematic priorities by components that address grand societal challenges, whilst taking into account the need to support research on key enabling technologies.

Agenda-driven societal challenges demand both problem- and target oriented research as well as curiosity driven research. Scientific quality and innovativeness are essential for both, but the time scales can vary.

Research funding cooperation

FP instruments that network research programmes (ERA-NETs, Art. 169, Art. 171) have started a new wave of cooperation between national and regional research funding organisations in Europe. The new EU RDI funding programme should be used to fund significant, pan-European research coordination actions, such as selected Joint Programming themes, or other coordination and networking activities (such as ERA-NETs). It is essential that these networking activities are allowed to continue to expand the cooperation to a global scale. International networking initiatives can reduce the need for national bilateral and multilateral agreements and thereby bring more efficiency to the cooperation between EU and third countries.

Trust

The new funding programme has to build on trust towards the applicants and beneficiaries. The outcomes or results of research and innovation activities cannot by definition be seen or guaranteed beforehand, but these activities are vital investments in the future nevertheless. The risky nature of RDI activities should be recognised and accordingly allow them a greater tolerable risk of error in the financial guidelines.

The trust-based approach should cover the specification of research themes in the Work Programmes as well. The research topics should not be defined in great detail, but instead leave more room for the researchers to

9.5.2011

use their expertise. Also the overall preparation of the Work Programmes should be made more open and transparent to allow the applicants to better plan and organize their cooperation activities.

Simplification measures should be broadmindedly taken as far as possible in every aspects of the new RDI funding programme.

Research Infrastructures

Dedicating a separate specific programme to Research Infrastructures (RIs) is essential in raising their visibility and reaching a sufficient level of political commitment. High-quality RIs are essential for top-level research and for attractiveness of the research environment. Establishing and maintaining RIs are often demanding undertakings, which pose challenges that cannot be met by individual Member States. Prioritising the RIs should primarily be the responsibility of Member States, but a great deal of collaboration between the EU Commission, ESFRI (European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures) and Member States is needed in the advancement of European RIs.

Analyses should not be fixed on whether a particular RI requires large-scale investment, but first and foremost on how it will benefit Europe, where it will place in the European RI landscape, and how the investments will help in meeting grand European challenges.

The measures are needed to support both existing and new RIs. We should continue to use the forthcoming EU RDI funding programme to support both access to RI and building of strong RI networks, as well as investigation and development projects concerning new RIs. Flexible funding arrangements for access to RI boosts transnational researcher mobility and is well in line with the objectives of the fifth freedom. The establishment of new, major European RIs and financing of their operation should also be included in the new RDI funding programme financing schemes. The EU funding must have a special role in the development and implementation of the roadmap projects of the ESFRI.

