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General considerations for EU Research and Innovation funding (FP8)

The global challenges the world is currently facing can only be tackled by a strong commitment to an open and efficient research and innovation funding system enabling scientific progress. With the European Research Council ERC the 7th Framework Programme of the European Union has introduced a valuable instrument for strengthening scientific and technological innovation and cooperation. In the future, though, in order to establish a European Research Area, the practice of pan-European research and innovation policy has to be improved. The following suggestions derive from the direct experiences of SSTC members with the past and current Framework Programmes and are meant to help existing initiatives to work better. They are complementary to the “Swiss General Considerations for FP8” whose numerous corollaries are fully embraced by the SSTC.

A. Less rules, more trust

In the last decades, the extraordinary growth of the European Framework Programmes has led to increasing organisational complexity which dissuades researchers and other interested participants from taking part. The procedures for getting involved are often too elaborate and time-consuming. The rules-based approach, appropriate enough for projects whose outcomes can be specified, is misguided in respect of research whose outcomes are by definition uncertain. Legalistic thinking prevalent in the administration of funding generates bureaucratic overload and threatens the future success of EU research and innovation funding.

For this reason we recommend that the European Commission reduces red tape and frees its Framework Programme from excessive rules and regulations. Eliminating bureaucracy is cost-saving and offers researchers a full scope for development. A new trust-based system is needed to allow researchers to get on with their work. The future programme administration should move away from excessively strict controls on finances and give participants more freedom to handle funding. Risks that an investment might return less than initially hoped need to be embraced as part of a new funding culture. European research funding should be based on trust, not legalism.

B. For a new balance between excellence and cohesion

The European Research Council ERC, the newest pan-European funding organisation for frontier research, aims to stimulate scientific excellence in Europe by encouraging competition between the best researchers of any nationality and age. The ERC follows a bottom-up approach, allowing researchers to identify new opportunities in any field of research. This funding model offers great flexibility in supporting outstanding research projects at the frontiers of knowledge, including new ideas that “don't fit” into other instruments of the Framework Programme. At the same time, however, this commitment to excellence restrains the participation of those member states whose funding system has not yet reached the competitive level needed to benefit from ERC grants.

To compensate for the existing asymmetries between different competitors, we recommend making a clearer distinction between an investigator-driven support strategy, committed to the principle of “excellence only”, and a cohesion-orientated funding policy, which in the name of solidarity, contributes to improving the research systems of disadvantaged member states. Scientific and specifically political objectives are too often intermingled in the current framework, in particular in the “cooperation”-programme. The future FP8 should find a new balance between initiatives directed at fundamental research (“science for science”) and those directed at targeting cohesion and capacity building (“science for policy”) in countries that lag behind. In the long run, the more new participants develop their competitive strengths, the more ERC funding should be increased.

C. Broadening ‘innovation’, involving the humanities

The “Innovation Union” launched by the European Commission mirrors the growing significance of innovation and innovation policy at the EU level. Within the Framework Programmes innovation is perceived as a key success factor for economic growth and employment. However, the various initiatives which aim at fostering the innovative research performance of Europe are based upon a concept of innovation focused primarily on exploitable technological products, thus blinding us to multiple and essential aspects of innovation processes involving societal and cultural dimensions. One of the results for this reductionist understanding of innovation is the under-representation of the humanities and social sciences in the past and current Framework Programmes.

For this reason, a broader understanding of innovation is necessary, an understanding that explores and promotes new interdisciplinary cooperation. Recent events have demonstrated that global challenges can only be tackled by the whole spectrum of scientific disciplines. Accordingly, the accessibility of the future FP8 should be improved for researchers from the humanities and social sciences by adapting the existing funding instruments to their specific needs. This means both systematically involving them in cutting-edge research projects and creating funding structures that are more appropriate to these disciplines.