



Statement by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

on the European Commission Green Paper "From Challenges to Opportunities: Towards a Common Strategic Framework for EU Research and Innovation Funding"

Introduction

The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) released in March 2011 a position paper on the future of research and innovation funding by the European Union. The DFG voiced its opinion especially on (1) early career support for researchers, (2) different approaches to funding collaborative research, and (3) the funding of research infrastructures.

In response to the Green Paper, the DFG has once again asked select representatives of its review boards (“Fachkollegien”) to give their assessments of the topics addressed therein. Review board members are outstanding representatives of all research communities and have been elected by all scientists and scholars working in Germany.

From the consultation of the review board members, seven key points have emerged. They complement the previously submitted DFG position paper and should be taken into consideration in the development of a joint strategy for EU funding of research and innovation. Additionally, the paper's annex feeds into the discussion DFG's model to improve women's participation in science.

1. Excellence as Benchmark

The scientific quality should be the top selection criterion in all research funding programmes. This should hold true for research projects in the same way as for the selection of PhD candidates in doctoral programmes. Additional criteria can only play a subsidiary role in programmes designed to promote highest excellence in research. Equally important as clearly defined criteria for project selection is a transparent selection of suitable reviewers. Scientific qualification should be the guiding criterion here as well. Goals such as cohesion and structural development, while important for the European Union, have no direct relation to research and should therefore be pursued with suitable instruments outside any FP7 follow-up programme.

2. Promoting Creativity

The creativity of scientists and scholars cannot be decreed, and it can be planned only to a limited extent. To unfold, it needs freedom and the right environment. For this reason, conditions must be established in all programmes to allow open or broadly formulated calls for proposals that welcome unconventional, innovative project ideas as well. This does not preclude the definition and prioritisation of certain grand challenges, as long as there is no attempt to micromanage the research agenda. Generally speaking, it should be assumed that the creativity of Europe's scientific communities is greater than that of any programme committee. Therefore, promoting curiosity-driven research is usually preferable to supporting agenda-driven research.

3. Innovation Needs Ideas

Any innovation in applications is based on innovative ideas. Therefore it is important to pursue an integrated approach to research funding that honours all aspects of the value chain. In particular, those aspects that could be classified as frontier research must be funded across all programmes more than in the past. Furthermore, the concept of “value creation through research” should not be limited to the industrial and business sector. The social sciences and humanities make essential contributions to our ability to meet societal challenges as well as to Europe’s cultural identity and intellectual appeal. They must therefore be appropriately represented in future funding programmes, i.e. much more strongly than they have been in previous framework programmes.

4. Preserving Diversity

The realisation of the European Research Area is one of the top policy targets for the coming years. It can only be achieved if the fragmentation of the European research landscape is overcome wherever it is scientifically detrimental. At the same time, the productive diversity of research, and of research funding, in Europe should be regarded as positive and nurtured more effectively. Some degree of competition between regional, national and European, as well as public, private and industrial, research funding should be welcomed. According to the principle of subsidiarity, the most suitable player should take charge at any given level. Regional and national funding organisations have the advantage of being very close to a particular research community and able to respond flexibly to its needs. At the European level, research funding should focus on aspects that cannot, or cannot sufficiently, be taken into account at the national level.

5. Ensuring Open Access and Re-use

The most important prerequisite for enacting innovations is the dismantling of innovation barriers along the value chain. Research findings should therefore be published in ways which facilitate broadest access to and productive re-use of previous research.

6. Expanding the ERC

The ERC has established itself as a brand within a short period of time. This has been possible thanks to a strict focus on excellence, strong involvement of the research community in the design and implementation of the programme, and a creativity-boosting bottom-up approach with open calls. For the ERC’s success story to continue, these principles must be maintained and the ERC’s budget increased. In particular, the role of the Scientific Council as representative of the research community must be strengthened. The principle of subsidiarity should apply also for the ERC.

7. Continuing Support for Collaborative Research

Equally important as individual funding (currently especially under Ideas) is the funding of transnational collaborative research projects (currently especially under Cooperation). It has proven effective under past framework programmes and should be continued at least at a comparable volume. Funded projects should be manageable in scope. Large-scale programme initiatives (JTI, Flagship Initiatives, etc.) can definitely not replace grants for specific collaborative projects. In order to drive integration along the entire value chain, frontier research should play a greater role also in the cooperation arena. Humanities and social sciences should be given more attention in this context. Furthermore, ERA-Nets should be continued as they have accumulated valuable experience on issues concerning the participation of large consortiums in programme development and on how to operationalise wide-ranging topics into clearly defined calls for proposals. Here, it makes sense to take advantage of this experience also for Joint Programming.

Annex: Honouring Gender Equality

Many countries in the European Union can no longer afford to turn down a considerable share of talents in research and innovation. Therefore, Europe has to do its utmost to attract more women to science and to keep them there. In 2008, the members of the DFG — i.e. most German universities, along with other research institutions — decided to introduce and implement Research-Oriented Standards on Gender Equality. This approach is based on the understanding that important measures for increasing the presence of women in research cannot be dictated from outside but are best undertaken in conjunction with universities, research associations, and the researchers themselves. Developed by an independent commission, the Research-Oriented Standards on Gender Equality formulate general criteria for effective gender-equality measures in research institutions. It is up to each institution to specify them according to its individual conditions. These independently developed and customised gender equality strategies can best honour the scientific, regional and structural characteristics of any given institution; they stand the best chance of integrating all stakeholders into the change process and firmly establishing gender equality standards within an organisation. The assessments of the outcomes of gender equality strategies will be publicised beginning in summer 2011 and linked to funding activities.