

Working Together to Strengthen Research in Europe European Research Area Conference 21-23 October 2009, Brussels

Summary of discussion and conclusions of individual session 1.3 'How can funding conditions for research institutions be improved?'

The issue and the context:

External funding is an increasing source of financing research and has become a key component of the funding mix for research organisations.

Funding conditions have a major impact on the capability of research institutions to achieve their goals. Research institutions set up strategies and mechanisms to benefit from competitive funding, to comply with the requirements of external funders, to pro-actively diversify their sources of funding. Across Europe, external competitive funding is currently provided by different types of funders, each of them with their respective strategies and expectations towards research institutions. To support their research portfolios, research institutions must be in a position to manage a huge diversity of external funding terms and conditions in order to access to funds. As for an example, University of Oxford complies annually with 800 different providers.

It is important to make sure that research performers are provided with the appropriate funding conditions allowing them to correctly deliver excellent research, as well as to fairly compete and easily cooperate across national borders. Fostering the strategic capacity of research institutions, as well as ensuring the long term sustainability of their research portfolios are major challenges in the ERA context.

In the current context of scarce resources, ensuring that research institutions can properly access external sources of funding is of utmost importance. The aim of the session was to address the respective responsibilities of the various actors (external funders, research institutions, public authorities), identifying the current impediments reducing the efficiency of research institutions as well as the ways to overcome them. The objective was to build a common vision for funding research in a responsible way, based on a mutual understanding between funders and research organisations, where greater clarity and consistency of funding conditions, based on an acknowledgement of the real costs of research, could mirror with an appropriate accountability and efficiency of research institutions.

This vision, to be defined and implemented, requires the recognition of a commonality of purposes and a strong commitment of actors. It also requires a gradual opening up of the national borders in the ERA context.

Analysis of the challenges and European dimension,

The wide range of existing opportunities for funding research is as such an advantage in the European Research landscape, as it offers different ways for research institutions to sustain their scientific activities with respect to their respective strengths and profiles.

However, the current lack of consistency among the terms and conditions of external funding creates complexity for research institutions. The absence of common concepts or common understanding of costing terminologies, combined with the complexity of conditions and reporting requirements (financial and technical) is a barrier to enhanced cross-border collaboration and to the optimisation of the efficiency and sustainability of research funding. This is an impediment for achieving a well functioning European Research Area.

Existing barriers shall be gradually removed. There is a need for building a shared vision for external research funding based on common principles. This vision, to be implemented, should be built by the stakeholders themselves. The Community level will strongly support the engagement of stakeholders in achieving concrete results.

In the ERA context, at the time where Joint Programming is to be implemented, the consistency of funding conditions will be of great interest. Shared acknowledgement of the real cost of research and shared simplified principles for reporting will greatly simplify the cross border collaboration and hence Joint Programming.

Conclusions/Recommendations:

The discussion stressed the central role of Universities and other research Institutions as key players for the achievement of the ERA. It particularly stressed the impact of funding conditions on research institutions' capabilities to deliver excellent research, and it underlined the joint-responsibility of actors – performers, research funders, national authorities – in ensuring the long term sustainability of the public research base and in overcoming national barriers preventing research institutions from a smooth cross-border collaboration.

The discussion emphasized the need for moving towards greater simplification, consistency and cross-border compatibility of competitive research funding terms and conditions. At the same time, full costing (ability to identify the real costs of activities¹) was underlined as a key component of an institutional financial management expected from Universities in the ERA context. The acknowledgement of a commonality of purpose between research funders and providers and the need of promoting a culture of trust across the ERA were mentioned as important conditions for success. One of the panellists pointed out that many research and technology organisations already use analytical full cost accounting.

A consensus was reached among the panellists on the appropriateness of identifying common principles for responsible external research funding in order to achieve greater consistency and compatibility amongst the terms and conditions of external research funding in Europe. Major umbrella organizations representing European research institutions and European research funding bodies, namely EUA, EARTO and TAFTIE expressed their readiness to develop such common principles. They also explicitly called for a strong support from the European Commission to move into this direction.

The concept of a 'European Grant Union' suggested by EuroHORCs was perceived as relevant for the future of ERA.

The catalytic role of Research Ministries was strongly pointed out for promoting greater clarity on the costs of research and stimulating a mutual dialogue with the view of better securing the long term sustainability of the public research base.

The panellists recall the timely opportunity to come up with agreed shared principles for external funding at a time where they could possibly also be taken on board in the design of the future Framework Programme of the EU.

¹ Knowledge of the true costs is a transparent basis for the justification of research subsidies. It is also a pre-requisite to correctly price with business contractors .