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Regional Aspects in the 7th Framework Programme

Expert Advisory Group
on
"Research Potential"
- 2009 -

REPORT



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Directorate-General for Research
Directorate B — European Research Area: Research Programmes and Capacity
Unit B.4— Regions of Knowledge and Research Potential

Contact: **Irmela BRACH**
European Commission
Office SDME 1/37
B-1049 Brussels
E-mail: Irmela.Brach@ec.europa.eu
Fax (32-2) 295.77.29

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Report prepared by

Prof. Manfred Horvat
(Vienna University of Technology, Austria)

Rapporteur of the EAG

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(EAGs) have been set up by the European Commission and are composed of independent experts working in their individual capacity. According to the mandate of the EAG the tasks of the EAG are³:

- *The members of the EAG commit themselves to discuss questions put forward and provide advice in their relevant fields of expertise to the best of their ability and in the best interest of Community research.”*
- *“Advice should be provided on strategy, relevant objectives and scientific and technological priorities, and the topics on which proposals are to be invited.”*
- *“The advice received from the EAG will complement other sources of external advice received by the Commission.”*

For the “Research Potential” EAG, 15 experts were nominated by the Commission.

The compilation of the list of experts was based on the following criteria:

- the appropriate range of expertise taking into consideration the objectives of the scheme;
- the appropriate understanding of and insights into horizontal aspects;
- the reasonable distribution of geographical origin;
- an appropriate gender balance.

The EAG members for the first two years of FP7 come from different institutional backgrounds, from universities (7), research laboratory (1), funding organisations (5), ministry (1) and research policy consultancy (1). 8 members are academics. A majority of the members has long-standing experience in European research and technology cooperation.

Information on the members of the External Advisory Group⁴ will be made available on EUROPA (http://europa.eu/index_fr.htm) in order to inform the public and European citizens about membership, mandate and activities of each advisory group.

This initiative is focused on "stimulating the realisation of the full research potential of the enlarged Union". Building on the decisions of the 7th Framework Programme and the Specific Programme “Capacities”, the Commission, on an annual basis, seeks expertise in order to identify the priority issues connected with the activity lines of the scheme.

The members of the EAG provide input during the meetings of the group and in written form to the Commission on a yearly basis, which is used in

³ For the tasks of the EAG see: European Commission: Mandate for Advisory Groups of the 7th Framework Programme.

⁴ See ANNEX 1 – list of members of the EAG "Research of Potential"

the preparation of the annual work programme. Advice to the Commission is the result of discussions within the Group.

This report reflects the EAG advice in view of the preparation of the Work Programme for 2009 as summarised by the rapporteur of the group.

EAG ADVICE for the Work Programme 2009

1. The EAG's work in preparation of the Work Programme 2009

For the preparation of the Work Programme 2009 the EAG met three times⁵. The EAG discussed the experiences following the first call for proposals and the state of the art of the implementation of the scheme. The preparatory discussions on Work Programme 2009 were based on first indicative verbal information provided by the Commission services including the programme director and the head of unit.

The members of the EAG were not satisfied that no written information except PowerPoint presentations has been made available till 13 March 2008. The Commission explained the situation because of efforts to arrive internally at a coherent and well coordinated approach across all parts of the Framework Programme and WP drafts cannot be disseminated before all WP drafts have been approved by the hierarchy.

In the EAG meeting on 13 March 2008, comprehensive information was provided by the Commission in PowerPoint format. That was the basis for an in-depth discussion by the EAG and with the Commission which forms the basis for the present report. Probably due to the exhaustive nature of these deliberations during the meeting with one exception no additional comments were provided by members of the EAG in the follow-up of the meeting.

2. Meeting the demand of research entities in the target regions – reconfirmed by the expected response by the second call

During the meeting on 13 March 2008 the Commission provided some first indicative quantitative information on the response to the second Call for Proposals for the "Research Potential" scheme based on information on applications received until a few days before the deadline on 14 March 2008. Already on the basis of the registrations in the proposal submission system the Commission assumed that the number applications will be much higher than expected, especially for REGPOT-1 leading to an even higher oversubscription than in the first call.

⁵ 22 November 2007, 11 January 2008, 13 March 2008

On the one side, this is a positive information because one can conclude that the scheme is really meeting a demand. On the other, side this result means that a lot of effort and investment was wasted and another result will be a high level of frustration of the target community.

In fact, one can repeat the statement made in the 2008 EGA Report: *“The substantial response to the first call is a success. However, on the other side the high numbers of proposals received in response to the call and the limitations of the available budget present also a challenge, especially due to the high rate of oversubscription.”*

As a consequence, it will be necessary to consider which consequences are to be drawn for the immediate future and for the rest of FP7. The immediate challenge will be to make optimal use of the scarce resources provided so far for the “Research Potential” scheme by the FP7 budget. One consequence could be raising the entrance barrier for the scheme and thus reducing the number of possible applicants, that means rethinking the target group.

In the long run, every effort should be undertaken for increasing the budgetary provisions for this scheme that has an obvious important role to play in the process of further developing the European Research Area. The forthcoming FP7 mid-term evaluation should be used preparing the appropriate steps for providing the appropriate financial framework for this scheme.

3. Preparing for the Work Programme 2009

3.1 Introduction

The EAG recalled the main objectives of the scheme namely upgrading the RTD capacity of research entities in the convergence regions and raising the quality of research carried out by them. By means of the activities supported by the scheme research organisations in the convergence regions should be empowered for cooperation with partners in other regions in the European Union under the 7th EU RTD Framework Programme. The scheme should make a substantial contribution to better integration into the European Research Area.

The EAG underlined the request emphasised by the Council in preparing for FP7 that all proposers will have to provide a comprehensive and rational action plan based on a self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses.

According to the general objectives of FP7 the “Research Potential” scheme will follow an approach focussing on excellence.

The EAG welcomed the ambition of the Commission to publish the Work Programmes 2009 in July 2008 already in order to enable potential applicants to plan their participation well in time.

3.2 Meeting the challenges of the present mismatch between budget and demand

Facing the frustrating situation of an unacceptable oversubscription the EAG discussed possible consequences. According to the information provided by the Commission the first call led to projects submitted by a large number of rather small teams of researchers and not from research institutions. Based on the indicative information regarding the second call the result will be probably even more problematic.

One way to reduce the size of the target group is addressing larger research entities, namely university departments, faculties or universities as a whole and also research institutes. Such an approach could have two consequences: reducing the number of possible applicants in a pragmatic way. However, in the opinion of the EAG this would not be sufficient for justifying such a change in the approach of the scheme. A stronger and more convincing argument is that addressing larger research entities and providing them with substantial financial means bears the potential for a higher impact of the action in the end.

3.3 The Calls foreseen by the “Research Potential” Work Programme 2009

According to the presentation by the responsible scientific officer (Maria Kayamanidou) the following calls are foreseen:

- REGPOT1-2009-1: Unlocking and developing the research potential of research entities in the convergence and outermost regions (former RegPot-1 and -2 calls merged into one call);
- REGPOT-2009-2: Brokerage facility;
- REGPOT-2009-3: International Cooperation (Mediterranean Partner Countries).

In the following, the discussions of the individual calls are reported.

3.3.1 REGPOT1-2009-1

Regarding REGPOT1-2009-1 the objective remains supporting the realisation of the full research potential of the enlarged ERA by improving research capacities of highest quality or most promising research entities in the target regions.

The important change compared to the previous calls is that the call will target research entities of significant size (e.g. university departments, faculties, specialised research institutes) in all FP7 themes. The call will address the few best entities in the convergence and outermost regions in order to develop visible ‘light houses’ and strong nodes for cooperation

with other parts of the EU. Other organisations are advised to address national or regional sources. Of course, also Structural Funds and instruments of Pre-accession Assistance are possible support programmes. Thus, synergies between Community instruments and regional and national schemes should be utilized.

The main obligatory elements of the activities will be

- a SWOT analysis at the start,
- an Action Plan encompassing the full set of measures foreseen in the Work Programme attuned to the needs of the institution as identified in the course of the SWOT analysis.

The five measures to be implemented by the research entities via the Action Plan will be

- supporting and mobilising the human and material resources,
- developing strategic partnerships with other outstanding research entities elsewhere in the Union (including industry and SMEs),
- disseminating scientific information as well as the results of scientific and technological research,
- facilitating communication and increasing visibility,
- improving the capacities to respond to socio-economic needs of the region or country.

In addition to the measures foreseen in the Action Plan the selected research entities can optionally apply for a six month international independent expert evaluation of their overall research quality and capability (including management and infrastructure). This evaluation will assess the state of the research quality of the institution and will also provide an assessment of what has been achieved in the course of the project.

The five new measures of the REGPOT-2009-1 are an extension of the former measures for REGPOT 1.

REGPOT-2009-1 allows developing strategic partnerships not only with other outstanding research entities elsewhere in the EU, but with SMEs and industry as well. This gives the possibility to the researchers on the one hand acquiring comparative knowledge concerning the ways and methods of utilisation their research results, on the other hand learning to communicate with people from the world of business and also e.g. to understand the significance of the IPR.

Instead of “participating in conferences” or “organizing conferences”, the new element “Facilitate communication & increase visibility” of the Action Plan highlights the necessity of very active participation of the researchers

in order to increase visibility of the research entity both in scientific circles and in the region.

There is a new measure element - "Improve responses to socio-economic needs of the region / country". It would be necessary to give more information in the Work Programme what kind of activities should or could be planned here. E.g. needs assessment in the field of education, employment, environment protection, energy sources, healthcare, information infrastructure etc of the region, preparation of a research driven cluster, impact evaluation of the project done by the Steering Committee at the end of the project etc.

The evaluation of the research entities was integrated into the measures as optional additional measure. It would be advisable to stress in the WP that this evaluation will be made by an independent expert only after finishing the project and it concerns the overall research quality and capability of the research entity (human resources, management, infrastructure). It must not be mixed up with the impact evaluation.

There were some reservations regarding the obligatory requirement of the Action Plan encompassing all five measures. However, the discussion lead to an agreement that such a design of the Action Plan is reasonable. There is the danger that otherwise applicants propose for instance just traditional mobility schemes. The combination of the measures according to the needs of the organisation is the added value of the scheme.

There were some discussions in the EAG whether the evaluation would be better placed at the start of the project. However, finally the members of EAG agreed that the combination of the SWOT analysis organised by the institution at the beginning where also indicators describing the research potential should be defined and the final external evaluation form a promising approach.

Several members of the expert group proposed to integrate the expert evaluation in the Action Plan as sixth obligatory measure. The Commission responded that it will be the task of the steering committee to follow and assess the achievements of the project and to take a decision on the application for a following independent expert evaluation for six months with a budget of 150 k€. After some discussion, a majority of the members of the EAG supported an integration of the independent evaluation as the sixth obligatory activity in the Action Plan. However, according to the FP7 decision as a legal basis this cannot be changed because there the evaluation is defined as a separate activity.

Since a main objective of the scheme is to strengthen the capability of institutions for participating in FP7 members of the EAG recommended that the increased capacities of the institution for entering into new strategic partnership should be one important issue for the evaluation.

Following the new orientation towards bigger organisational entities of the call the EGA supported the increase project budget of 2 to 4 M€ and a project duration of up to 36 months, plus possibly 6 months for an independent expert evaluation.

3.3.2 REGPOT-2009-2 Brokerage Facility

Research centres in the convergence and outermost regions are facing the problem that they are still suffering from deficits regarding their visibility in other parts of the European Union. On the other side, research organisations in the 'old member states' very often are lacking information on research entities in the 'new member states'. There is certainly an obvious need for 'bridging the gap' and stimulating communication and contacts between research actors in the 'old' and the 'new' member states.

Therefore, the Work Programme 2009 proposes that a 'Brokerage Facility' is offered by the Research Potential scheme. Four well known organisations are identified as beneficiaries for that activity:

- The European Science Foundation (ESF);
- ALLEA (ALL European Academies), the European Federation of National Academies of Sciences and Humanities;
- The European University Association (EUA);
- ESMU, the European Centre for Strategic Management of Universities.

1 M€ is foreseen as indicative budget for this activity for the whole duration of FP7 till 2013.

The Commission presented the Brokerage Facility as an interesting experiment and a pilot activity. Some members of the EAG reacted rather sceptical to the proposal for this part of the Work Programme. On the other side, some members found this measure very useful for the new member states and associated countries (e.g. Western Balkan Countries) which started to be involved in European RTD activities not long ago. Some members reacted positively to the general idea investing also in exploratory activities for stimulating more intensive collaboration between different parts of the European Research Area. In such a huge programme like FP7 there should also be some room for experimentation.

During the discussions, some EAG members emphasised that a clear coordination and cooperation between the Brokerage Facility and the National Contact Points (NCPs) has to be ensured. It was also proposed to install a Steering Committee for the monitoring of this experiment.

The Commission took note of both the sceptical and the supporting remarks regarding the Brokerage Facility.

3.3.3 REGPOT-2009-3 International Cooperation

According to the presentation by the Commission the third call "FP7-REGPOT-2009-3" will promote the international dimension of the Research Potential activity with the Mediterranean Partner Countries (MPC).

At least 3 independent legal entities engaged in research should be associated per project: one established in a MPC, one other in a convergence or outermost region of the EU or Associated Countries, and one other in a different Member State or Associated Country to the previous one.

An Action Plan should be proposed for funding by the applicants including a coherent set of the 5 Research Potential measures. Funding of new or upgraded equipment as well as of hiring of experienced or young researchers will be eligible solely for the MPC participant.

The project size will be up to a 1 M€ contribution from the EC and the project duration up to 36 months. The call's budget will be 8 € from third appropriations.

The members of the EAG reacted positively to the presentation and to the intention of the call. However, the question was raised why only the MPC are addressed.

Responding the Commission emphasised that the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) presents the guiding policy for that call. There are very good reasons for targeting the MPC:

- There are already Science and Technology Agreements between the Community and four MPC countries (Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan).
- Turkey and Israel are fully associated to FP7 and
- Cyprus and Malta are EU Member States.

The Western Balkan Countries with the exception of Bosnia Herzegovina are associated to FP7 and therefore fully eligible to the scheme. Bosnia Herzegovina is likely to be associated soon.

For addressing the Eastern neighbours of the EU such as Ukraine the budget of the Research Potential scheme is just too small.

Following these explanations and discussion the EAG supported the proposed international cooperation action of the Research Potential with the MPC.

CONCLUSION

The EAG hopes that the contributions made in the course of the intensive discussions during the meetings will contribute to the further improvement and strengthening of the “Research Potential” initiative for the benefits of the proposers and their research entities as well as for the further development of the European research activities and the European Research Area.

During their activities for the preparation and support of the Work Programme 2009 the members of the EAG have deepened their conviction that the “Research Potential” scheme is very much appropriate to substantially enhancing RTD cooperation in Europe and supporting the integration of research entities from the convergence and outermost regions in the Union.

However, the members of the EAG are deeply concerned about the tight budgetary limitations of the scheme which is in strong contrast to the enormous demand by target organisations shown in the response to the first two calls for proposals. There is a strong need for reviewing the scheme and achieving an appropriate balance between the demand and the budgetary means. This will certainly have to be an important issue to be addressed in the course of the forthcoming FP7 mid-term evaluation.

ANNEX 1

Members of the External Advisory Group “Research Potential”

BALES , Vladimir	Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava (STU), Slovakia
BANCEVISIUS , Ramutis	Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania
BRESKVAR , Katja	University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
DE SOUSA , Maria	Molecular Immunology La, IBMC, Porto, Portugal
DONZELLI , Maria	University of Naples, Italy
FOTAKIS , Costas	Foundation for Research and Technology Hellas, Greece
GAVRILLA , Horia	Ministry of Education and Research, Romania
HINSENKAMP , Maria	Hinsenkamp & Co International Communication Services DP, Hungary
HORVAT , Manfred	Vienna University of Technology, Austria
KLUSACEK , Karel	Technology Centre, Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic
PERKOWSKI , Thomas	Foundation for Polish Science, Poland
SAVUNEN , Liisa	Finnish Council of University Rectors, Finland
TORNÉ I ESCASANY , Montserrat	ICREA (Catalan Foundation for Research and Advanced Studies), Spain
WIENEKE-TOUTAOU , Burghilde	University of Applied Sciences Berlin, Germany
WILLIAMS , Clive	Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

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The objective of the “**Research Potential**” initiative is to enhance the full integration of research entities from convergence regions and outermost regions of the Enlarged Europe into the EU research and technology activities.

During the activities for the preparation and support of the **Work Programme 2009** the members of the EAG have further endorsed the “Research Potential” scheme.

Supporting the integration of **research entities from the convergence and outermost regions in the Union** is a most relevant initiative complementing other efforts for strengthening the European research fabric in the best possible way.

Especially developing **better synergies between the Framework Programme and the Structural Funds** will remain high on the agenda and will require continued attention.

