Towards a European Framework for Innovation and Impact Research Alliances: making the Innovation Union work

Position paper, Universities of Applied Sciences Network (UASnet)
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The Universities of Applied Sciences in Europe have combined into the network UASnet with the objective to promote and strengthen the integration and contribution of the UAS sector within the research and innovation strategy of Europe. The network partners welcome the stated intent of the EU Innovation Union to create a regionally focused applied research programme to support all aspects of the innovation lifecycle.

The UAS focus on developing the high level skill needs of the regions through fulltime and continuing professional higher education, and on engaging in applied research and innovation with regional SMEs, public institutions, the not for profit sector and social profit sector. This focus by the UAS sector on supporting regional needs makes it an ideal partner to deliver on all facets of the Innovation Union agenda.

From the experience of regional engagement we recommend two key goals in the new research and innovation strategic programmes:

1. Ensuring an impact-driven orientation to all programmes with support for all stages of the innovation lifecycle.
2. Leveraging regions of smart applied research and innovation by vertical and horizontal integration of regional, national and European applied research and innovation programmes through focused alliances.

The UAS would like to stress incorporating the following 4 elements into the new strategy to ensure an impact driven orientation and to facilitate the forming of innovation networks in the new programmes.

➢ For economic prosperity: unleashing the innovation potential of high technology and non high tech SMEs from the region onto the European level through connecting regions of knowledge by smart specialisation.

➢ For societal welfare: supporting public institutions, the not for profit sector and the social profit sector, like hospitals, child care institutes and municipalities, in cross-border collaboration and social innovation to address the European grand challenges like healthy ageing, climate control and urbanization.

➢ For a sustainable innovation basis: translating innovation and research results into the higher education of professionals, both initial and lifelong learners.

➢ For sustainable innovation creativity and dissemination: investing in building up of European alliances of SMEs, public institutions, the not for profit sector and the social profit sector, regional authorities, RTOs, UAS and complementary knowledge institutes.
1. Ensure an impact driven orientation with support for all stages of the innovation lifecycle

Supporting applied research, innovation and education

We believe that there needs to be a reorientation of European research towards impact driven research linked to industrial and socio-economic innovation. A far greater level of funding and diversity of programmes aligned to the needs of the European citizen should be implemented. These programmes should have a greater emphasis on delivery of impact at a regional level for all citizens and should be far more accessible to the SME and civic organisations based in Europe. Moreover, action lines are needed to ensure that those innovation results and implementations in the labour market are firmly embedded in the Bachelors and Masters of professional higher education. In order to achieve such a reorientation, UASnet makes the following recommendations.

a) Introducing new performance indicators

UASnet emphasises that a fundamental change in EU research towards a greater emphasis on applied research and innovation outputs can only occur if there are clear criteria for assessment of proposals: to ensure that proposals will deliver on expected outputs that are tied to elements of the innovation cycle and which clearly identify deliverables that will improve socio-economic well being of Europe for it’s citizens. Assessments should not only encompass science, but also impact on society, professional practice and education. UASnet invites the European Commission to develop together with the UAS sector relevant performance indicators for impact-driven innovation and research proposals.

b) Involving SMEs, public institutes and the not for profit and social profit sector

We see a need to better involve those enterprises and organizations that experience the need to innovate, but do not have an extensive R&D infrastructure in place nor the experience in applying for EU research funding. To achieve this, programmes need to support projects of appropriate scale, need to be readily accessible, flexible in time and need to have a significant expectation of proposal success. We would recommend an expansion of the FP7 SME type research programme as a means of achieving this, and incorporate organizations like hospitals, municipalities, elderly and child care institutes and the creative sector.

c) Involving the whole innovation cycle

To create a comprehensive innovation base in Europe it is essential that projects can be focused on all elements of the innovation lifecycle and on all types of research be it product, process, paradigm or position and be it scientific, technological, social or economic. It is only with a truly integrated approach that real delivery of outcomes to industry and society will occur.

d) Investing in the pre- and post-project phases

More attention to the pre-phase and follow-up phase, separate or as part of a project, would highly benefit Europe’s innovation and research potential. This would enable parties interested in European collaboration to devote time for building up their knowledge networks and infrastructure across borders, finding the right partners, and testing the required innovation and research demands in line with the fast timeframe from the world of work.
Equally the post project phase will be critical in ensuring that the project learning and outcomes are integrated into a broader innovation culture. We expect that this would enhance participation from organisations from the not for profit and social profit sector, SMEs and UAS, since funding the important pre and post-phase ensures that greater directed impact from projects.

**e) Investing in the translation of research and innovation results into Bachelor and Master programmes**

A complementary focus in the new programmes should be reserved for the translation of innovation and research results back into higher professional education. Since this benefits the initial and lifelong learners who are thus able to bring a RD&I mindset to their professions. It is this link - starting from innovation and research to education - that the production, transfer and exploitation of new knowledge is fostered as well. The long-term sustainability of innovation and research project impact, requires people with the right skill set bringing daily innovation to their jobs.

**f) Finding smart synergies between Education, Cohesion and Framework Funds**

Ensuring that Europe strengthens its innovation and research competitiveness requires a broad approach. Key is the combination of European funds to fully support the whole innovation cycle and consequent timeframe. Offering funding for projects is therefore only part of the answer. Investing in lead time and follow-up of projects, fitting education, and industry-academia links are just as necessary. Education programmes and the Cohesion Funds can be used for this alignment.

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**2. Ensure horizontal and vertical integration of regional, national and EU research and innovation**

**Connecting to regional innovation**

National and regional governments have for some time recognised the importance of supporting applied research and innovation in SMEs and the not for profit and social profit sector through programmes based on partnerships between the UAS sector and these companies. This is done in the form of applied research programmes, innovation partnerships, competency programmes, and centres of excellence or other instruments. From experience we have seen that the innovation and research needs of these organizations are best served through support on the regional level and by impact driven research with a direct societal and economic effect.

However, the effectiveness of these programmes is in many cases limited by lack of ready access to international expertise and interaction with other groups. Equally, there needs to be coherent capacity building platform programmes existing at EU level to form the basis for excellence in applied research and innovation at an international and local level.
UASnet proposes that the next framework programme strengthens the capacity of industry and public organisations to respond to next generation needs by the creation of platforms of excellence in strategic areas of applied research and innovation which are aligned to and integrated with regional and national initiatives. Therefore we recommend the following.

a) Introducing more ways of parallel funding
We expect that the possibility to access for the same project both regional, national and European innovation funding will increase participation from those SMEs and the organizations in the not for profit and social profit sector who experience the need to innovate but do not have a large R&D infrastructure in place. At the same time UAS will be better equipped to broaden their innovation and research projects with the world of work, in the case parallel funding is acknowledged as part of the required co-funding.

b) Supporting European-wide networks for smart specialisation and applied research
UAS and their partners from the world of work often find a strong basis for innovation in their region. Up to now this innovation is not used to its fullest potential as it seldom crosses borders. Linking the regions of knowledge by way of smart specialization is a way to unleash this regional innovation potential onto the European level. The parties involved, UAS, SMEs, the not for profit and social profit sector, need support in funding the building of European-wide networks of applied research. These partnerships will create a platform for regionally based and prioritised applied research linked to the needs of the world of work in the diverse European regions. By developing such European-wide knowledge networks the labour market is ensured with the best possible answer to their innovation and education needs.

c) Mapping best practices of regional innovation funding and developing clusters
In order to facilitate that UAS and their partners from the world of work build up European-wide innovation networks, we invite the European Commission to support a European Framework for Innovation and Impact Research Alliances (EFIRA). This foundation would consist of the European alliance partners from UAS, SMEs, organisations from the not for profit sector and social profit sector, intermediary organisations, regions and RTOs. These alliance partners are best equipped to identify and develop European-wide thematic knowledge clusters which form the backbone of applied research and innovation. Collaborations address both the economic processes and the grand challenges. Next to this, the alliance partners could be tasked with investigating the best practices for funding innovation in diverse countries on the regional and national level. This helps cross-border collaboration and working towards European harmonisation.

We are convinced that the adoption of the proposals above will create a cohesion of applied research and innovation in which the regional initiatives and best practices on impact driven research for SMEs and public organizations are taken as stepping stone for European cross-border collaboration and smart specialisation. This approach will facilitate the development of a coherent EU innovation drive and allow individual regions to leverage knowledge throughout the partnerships on a cost effective and timely manner.
Detailed response to the 27 questions.

1. Introduction

This submission has been prepared in response to the European Commission Green Paper “From Challenges to Opportunities: Towards a Common Strategic Framework for EU Research & Innovation Funding”.

This submission communicates the view of the UAS Sector in relation to FP7 and changes that could lead to an improved FP8.

This view is based on the experience of the Universities of Applied Sciences throughout Europe in the ten participating countries of UASnet1, with specific reference to:

- The role of UAS in carrying out applied and industry focused research
- The particular relevance of SMEs and regional economic development in guiding the focus of research innovation strategy within the UAS.

The Commission green paper sets out 27 questions that address the strengths and weaknesses of European research and innovation programmes and possible solutions for their improvement. Our responses to these questions are based on our past experience of Framework Programmes. The emphasis of these responses lean towards applied research that is carried out in close collaboration with industry, in particular with SMEs and will result in the delivery of innovative products, goods or services.

Every time we mention in this paper collaboration with SMEs, we also mean the organizations from the public sector (like municipalities and regional authorities) and the not for profit and social profit sector (like schools, child care and elderly care institutes, hospitals, libraries, and creative sector).

2. UASNET response to the EU Green Paper on the future of EU research and innovation funding

This submission has been structured to respond to the 27 questions that were identified in the consultation green paper. The main points put forward in response to this submission are:

- Simplify the administrative load associated with applying for and negotiating EU projects;
- Improve the role and accessibility of SMEs in EU Research & Innovation Programmes (and by inference, applied research institutions)
- Maximise the potential of EU research & innovation to be translated to European jobs and products by revising the management of Intellectual Property to favour SMEs
- Create better alignment between EU, national and regional research and innovation programmes
- Expand the People programme to encourage more professional, industrial and part-time PhDs.

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1 The Universities of Applied Sciences are also more traditionally known as Fachhochschulen, hogescholen, university colleges, IUT’s, Institutes of Technology, new universities, polytechniques.
This submission does not address all 27 questions set down in the Green Paper. Instead, in keeping with our primary role, we have focused on the questions that relate directly to the role of SMEs and applied research institutions.

1. **How should the Common Strategic Framework make EU research and innovation funding more attractive and easy to access for participants? What is needed in addition to a single entry point with common IT tools, a one stop shop for support, a streamlined set of funding instruments covering the full innovation chain and further steps towards administrative simplification?**

Simplify the language, documentation and process associated with negotiation of consortium agreements. This could be achieved in the following ways:

- **Reduce the perceived complexity of the contract negotiation process** by modifying the documentation to set out the terms of the agreement in non-legal language;
- **Increase the number of default positions associated with a consortium agreement.** For example, in projects where SMEs are involved, the rules around IP agreements should be set to favour participating SMEs. They should give SMEs first rights to exploit IP generated from a project and access rights to background IP associated with the project. This is addressed in greater detail in response to Q6.

2. **How should EU funding best cover the full innovation cycle from research to market uptake?**

- **Identify mechanisms to involve more SMEs in a greater number of framework projects.** Ringfencing of more projects to include SMEs could bring greater opportunity to take projects fully through the innovation cycle to market uptake. In this context, SMEs would bring the following benefits:
  - Improved definition of market needs and the potential impact of the research
  - A more clear pathway to market

This would also require increased involvement of the Universities of Applied Sciences who have the skills and capability to engage effectively with SMEs through applied research and innovation.

- **Build greater flexibility into projects.** Within the current structure, project partners must be named and signed up front, their role defined and they must remain with the project until completion.
  - This involves a commitment and rigidity that is counter-productive in terms of delivering innovation
  - This may deter SMEs from participating as the full commitment that is required may exceed their capacity or perceived relevance to the project.

EU programmes may better serve the innovation cycle if they can reflect the uncertainty that is generally associated with the innovation process. This could be achieved by implementing the following changes:

  - Relax the requirement that all partners to be named and signed up in the original consortium agreement. Instead, the “type” of partner could be described and
identified at an interim stage of a project when its progress and deliverables are apparent.

- Allow project coordinators the flexibility to assess progress at an interim stage, adapt the project accordingly, and/or bring in other partners that will be suited to the expected deliverables from the project;
- Recognise that the progress and final deliverables of a project cannot always be specified up front. Rules should allow consortium partners, (particularly SMEs) to enter a project for a discreet and clearly defined phase, with clear purpose and deliverables. Once this phase is completed and the outputs delivered, the SME partner would be able to exit the project, while also benefitting from the knowledge and IP accruing from the work.

3. **What are the characteristics of EU funding that maximise the benefit of acting at the EU level? Should there be a strong emphasis on leveraging other sources of funding?**

4. **How should EU research and innovation funding best be used to pool Member States resources? How should Joint Programming Initiatives between groups of Member States be supported?**

These two questions are addressed together. The emphasis should not be so much on leveraging other sources of funding, but rather on ensuring a greater level of joined up thinking and policy between EU funds and other sources of funding. To achieve this, the new FP8 should:

- **Identify where and how the framework programme can be tied into national and regional funding instruments.** At present, there can be significant duplication between national, regional and EU funding initiatives. This duplication may limit the value of the research for both funders and research institutions. A common strategic framework should drive enhanced visibility of an overall European “Research Map” that would allow coherence between the various funding instruments to be achieved. Work is required at a relatively high level to map research activity between the Commission and its Member States and regions. This would be a two-way responsibility between European Commission and Member States to:
  - Understand what is currently being funded
  - Provide greater visibility that would inform a strategic approach to aligning the focus and funding of European, National and Regional programmes;
  - Allow the Framework Programme to develop into an overarching instrument that encourages and enables greater coherence and consistency between the policies and funding instruments of Member States.

- **Extend the ERA-NET initiative.** Proceed to develop an ERA-NET Plus initiative that will create further opportunities for joint programming between countries.

5. **What should be the balance between smaller, targeted projects and larger, strategic ones?**

Both types of projects are important and should be supported.
The Commission should ring-fence a proportion of funding for larger, strategic projects that also incorporate SMEs and institutions, particularly those that can bring capability in applied research and innovation. These ring-fenced projects would have an opportunity to demonstrate an improved path to market and enhanced outputs of jobs and new products. The PPP programme may provide an opportunity to balance short term, targeted outputs with longer-term strategic objectives.

6. **How could the Commission ensure the balance between a unique set of rules allowing for radical simplification and the necessity to keep a certain degree of flexibility and diversity to achieve objectives of different instruments, and respond to the needs of different beneficiaries, in particular SMEs?**

The following approaches are suggested to ensure the balance between simplification of rules and allowing the necessary flexibility and diversity to achieve objectives of different instruments. These issues are also addressed in our responses to Q1 and 2. In summary:

- **Simplify the rules surrounding IP.** Introduce default positions to favour SMEs. For example, SMEs should have full rights to exploit the IP emerging from a project in a limited field of application that is appropriate to the SME’s business. This approach would simplify the IP negotiation process, incentivise more SMEs to participate in FP7 without significantly impacting the potential for universities to generate spin out opportunities for their research (because rights exploitation rights for other applications could be retained by the universities or other project partners);

- **Ring fence a portion of every programme for projects that have SME participation:** Associated with these projects, implement a number of default rules which favour the SMEs. These would include IP negotiation (as described above), simplifying the language and rules associated with the negotiation process and allowing for SMEs to opt into and out of different phases of the project, according to its relevance to them.

- **Relax the requirement that partners and inputs for the entire project be specified from the beginning of the project:** Refer to Q 2 for details of this proposal.

7. **What should be the measures of success for EU research and innovation funding? Which performance indicators could be used?**

The successful exploitation of Intellectual Property should be introduced as a KPI of European research. This focus on the exploitation of intellectual property may encourage the following:

- Identification of pathways for commercialisation of IP, to be delivered within a specified timeframe relating to the project;

- Compilation of un-commercialised IP into an IP database that would be held by the commission and made available to European SMEs;

- Identification of pre-existing IP that has been generated from old projects that would also be identified, categorised and made available to European SMEs.
8. **How should EU research and innovation funding relate to regional and national funding?**

How should this funding complement funds from the future Cohesion policy, designed to help the less developed regions of the EU, and the rural development programmes?

At present, there is a lack of complementarity between the current Framework Programme and other national or regional programmes. This disjoint may bring about one or both of the following issues:

- Lack of mutual awareness between the Commission, Member States and Regions on what research is being funded and how research funding is targeted;
- Insufficient alignment between funding programmes at EU, national and regional level.

As referred to in the answer to Question 4, these issues lead to duplication or fragmentation of funding, factors which weaken the effectiveness and potential impact of European research. This is particularly important as EU programmes comprise a relatively minor portion of overall investment in European research.

Possible solutions include the following:

- **Undertake a European-wide exercise to understand what research is being funded and by whom**;
- **Identify a mechanism to allow continuing visibility between the Commission and national and regional funding bodies**;
- **Drive an increased strategic alignment** (a common strategic framework) between member states, regions (including less developed regions) and the Commission. This should be a two-way responsibility, with EU programmes increasingly becoming the lever that drives coherence between national and regional development and R&D policies throughout all member states;
- **Develop more programmes of the nature of “Regions of Knowledge”** where a three way interaction between industry/research providers/policy makers are encouraged. (e.g. this approach should be mainstreamed within the cooperation calls).

9. **How should a stronger focus on societal challenges affect the balance between curiosity-driven research and agenda-driven activities?**

The impact of EU-funded research is likely to be greatest if it addresses key societal challenges, therefore the large proportion of EU funding should continue to be directed towards these research programmes.

Some curiosity driven research should be encouraged and funded on the basis of very high levels of excellence.

10. **Should there be more room for bottom-up activities?**

The bottom-up activities supported by the Capacities programmes have been highly effective at encouraging SME participation. It reduces the requirement for SMEs to “shoehorn” into programmes that may not suit so well. Bottom up research, because it may be more market driven, may also be shown to deliver higher yields in terms of commercial outputs. Thus these activities should be promoted and expanded where possible.
Likewise, the People programme has been highly effective at encouraging participation at individual level, along with playing a key role in building European networks.

11. How should EU research and innovation funding best support policy making and forward-looking activities?

We suggest that EU programmes might be opened to include three-way collaborations involving industry/RTD providers and national or regional policy-makers – thereby making space within the programme activities for policy-making and/or foresight activities. This is also addressed in our response to Q.8.

12. How should the role of the Commission’s Joint Research Centre be improved in supporting policy making and addressing societal challenges?

The JRC should play a key role in supporting the development of a common strategic framework for European research. Their enhanced role should include:

- Driving greater strategic coherence, visibility and alignment across EU, national and regional R&D programmes;
- Foresight and future planning exercises;
- Specifying mechanisms for maximizing the returns delivered by IP that has been generated from EU-funded projects.

13. How could EU research and innovation activities attract greater interest and involvement of citizens and civil society?

Greater interest and involvement by citizens and civil society might be achieved through the following:

- Greater focus on clearly described societal challenges
- Improved delivery of tangible results, particularly through the involvement of SMEs which will create awareness at local and regional levels.

- By increasing the participation of the organized civil society through the regular channel in use at the EU for the design of the program and the choices of topics.
- More involvement of different EU actors like the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Parliament.

A positive perception of the role and contribution the European Commission can make at local and regional levels could be an additional, indirect impact from the involvement of more SMEs.

14. How should EU funding best take account of the broad nature of innovation, including non-technological innovation, eco-innovation and social innovation?

The non-technological, eco- and social innovation are very important aspects of innovation that should occupy important position in EU research and innovation schemes. To give them a chance, they are to be evaluated according to their specificities and by evaluators that have the necessary knowledge of these domains.
Ideally these could be incorporated more explicitly into the Research for the Benefit of SMEs programmes where companies are frequently equipped and eager to take up innovation opportunities outside of technological innovation.

15. How should industrial participation in EU research and innovation programmes be strengthened? How should Joint Technology Initiatives (such as those launched in the current Framework Programme) or different forms of 'public-private partnerships' be supported? What should be the role of European Technology Platforms?

SMEs are referred to in some detail in response to Q.1 and 2. In summary, the suggestions made include the following:
- Simplify the administrative burden and negotiation process associated with FP7 research projects.
- Implement a clear, default approach to IP management that favours participating SMEs.
- Relax the requirement to specify the project partners and roles up front, and permit SMEs to participate in a project only for the parts that are relevant to them.

We also suggest that a greater emphasis is placed on impact and application in the evaluation process. This would provide an incentive to academic applicants to engage more closely with industry as a means of improving their capacity to understand and deliver impact.

16. How and what types of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SME) should be supported at EU level; how should this complement national and regional level schemes? What kind of measures should be taken to decisively facilitate the participation of SMEs in EU research and innovation programmes?

The bottom up approach to the Research for the Benefit of SMEs programme allows for any type of SME to participate. In the experience of the Universities of Applied Sciences, there are common characteristics to SMEs that can participate successfully in European applications and/or programmes:
- They are knowledge-based, frequently spin-in or spin-out companies that are based in campus incubation centres;
- They may be young, (less than 5 years old) but they will have a significant R&D expenditure, a high level of innovation capacity and a sustainable financial position.

Frequently, the level of innovation that older, owner-managed businesses are able to absorb is insufficient for the requirements of FP7.

If EU programmes can be broadened to encourage smaller innovation projects, perhaps involving non-technological or eco-innovation, owner-managed SMEs that do not have a significant R&D expenditure may be incentivised to participate.

To facilitate SME participation, a better support structure might be necessary, like a helpdesk: answer within one working day, communication ideally in the language of the SME, able to solve the question in direct contact with project officers within short delays.
17. How should open, light and fast implementation schemes (e.g. building on the current FET actions and CIP eco-innovation market replication projects) be designed to allow flexible exploration and commercialisation of novel ideas, in particular by SMEs?

Best practice that has been proven to work within these schemes should be captured and translated into other EU programmes.

20. How should intellectual property rules governing EU funding strike the right balance between competitiveness aspects and the need for access to and dissemination of scientific results?

As outlined in response to Q1, 2 and 15, SMEs will benefit from IP arrangements that act in their favour. This will increase the involvement of SMEs in collaborative research programmes, increase the number of opportunities to deliver commercialisable results from EU-funded research and simplify the contract negotiation process.

IP should be handled in a way that the Higher Education Institutions, respectively the Universities of Applied Sciences, keep ownership freedom to continue research, to publish and to integrate research results in the study courses.

- Commercialization in the particular business area is the task of the SMEs/industries.
- Open access publishing and open source software should be promoted.

23. How should the role of Marie Curie Actions be strengthened in promoting researcher mobility and developing attractive careers?

Current Marie Curie programmes should be sustained and extended to include the following:

- Greater levels of industry-academic exchange
- Formalised professional or industrial PhDs (both fulltime and part-time).
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