

jerzy langer **view from the top**

Time to sharpen our focus on knowledge-based Europe

Without doubt 2009 will mark the beginning of a new world economic order. The essence of the crisis is that free market rules cannot restore equilibrium and that states must step in. Their responsibility is a matter not only of sustainable growth, but also of peaceful survival.

The first victim of the crisis has been strategic thinking. Most of Europe's politicians no longer even mention the Lisbon strategy and Lisbon goals.

The reactive approach we are witnessing now was natural and acceptable in the first stages of the economic emergency. But the crash is over. The clean-up will be carried out by appropriate services and institutions. Meanwhile the interrupted process of building a 'knowledgeable Europe' must be restarted at full speed.

The financial tsunami came right in the middle of a debate about the new EU budget. All the brave talk of creating a "common pot" for that future knowledgeable Europe went on the back burner. And, to add to this disastrous financial instability, the voices of eurosceptics have become louder than ever.

This nonsense must stop. Europe's enlargement has borne fruit for all of us, the euro is replacing the US dollar as a major currency, and the European economy, with all its troubles, is still in reasonable shape.

Hopefully Sweden, the world leader in building the knowledge society, will now take the European lead. The Nordic countries' response to the crisis could not be more vivid. They call for an increase in resources for research and education; pro-innovation reforms of the university system; and loud support for that common pot.

The EU budget must become the pivotal support for an innovative Europe. Excellence is a priority, but only part of the message. More significant is that all institutions responsible for R&D in member states must take responsibility for the creation of a first class Europe-wide research ecology. They must do this by both offering their resources and harmonising their efforts. The duplication of mediocre research in Europe must be stopped.

Europe's gross domestic expenditure on R&D (GERD) is one third of the world research total. The Framework Programme, with its current 7bn euros a year, seems small, but in reality it is a very significant and unique common pot—more than 10 per cent of the European budgetary resources. And it can be used for real projects and not just bricks-and-mortar plus salaries.

But the philosophy of the Framework Programmes has

to change. It must become a major European resource to address the grand challenges that Europe and the world face. Quality and originality is a must, but relevance is at premium. The future programme must become much more flexible and responsive. And this can be achieved by a system of councils under the general jurisdiction of the European Commission, as already happens in most advanced countries of Europe and the United States.

Current executive agencies are neither responsive nor efficient. They are too deeply rooted in the "old guard" of EC thinking. The 'grand challenge' is clearly a top-down approach, with all the attendant dangers of lobbying, endless negotiations and costly administration.

But it need not be so. The member states must be a part of this game, but researchers and business representatives chosen through a trustworthy nomination process must take precedence. The European Research Council, administering a 1bn-euro budget, offers a model of how this can be achieved.

Bottom-up frontier research must become the second pillar of the future Framework Programme, with excellence as the decisive factor. The current approach, to seek only the most talented individuals, must be quickly broadened to teamwork. Framework 6's new and emerging science and technology (NEST)—a superb precursor of the ERC—shows that this can be done.

The third and final pillar of the Framework Programme is to help member states to stimulate joint undertakings, creating the joint research infrastructure by proper financial and personnel 'lubrication'.

The time has come for a new deal, just like Franklin Roosevelt's response to the 1930s crisis. But our new deal must involve three parties: the member states; the EC; and, through respectful non-governmental organisations and pan-European organisations such as the ESF and Euroscience, and society at large.

The member states must abandon the "just returns" approach and accept both the common pot and benchmarking through a common evaluation system. The EC should become more of a policy setter, guardian and facilitator. A costly funding process must be externalised under very tight public control.

Finally, we must all remember that time is even more important than money. Europe doesn't need more endless discussion and wisdom exchange. We must act, and quickly. More to say? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com

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