

view from the top jerzy langer

Framework needs to be simpler

“O wonder! How many goodly features are there here! How beauteous Framework is! O simplified new world! That has such programmes in’t!”

Change four words and you have Miranda’s dialogue with Ferdinand in the chess scene from Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*. But it would take much more than that to transform the EU Framework Programme into a precision instrument for research in a United Europe.

The complexity of project preparation and administration were seen as major disincentives to participation in Framework 6. Another was the relatively low success rate. But simplifying the application process will not compensate for the exceedingly small chance of receiving a grant. So why has talk of simplifying the process become a major focus of the political debate on the future of Framework? Is it not simply a substitute for more important discussions on the substantive goals of this programme and the best way to achieve them?

The Framework Programme comes out of the EU budget, and is thus a personal responsibility of the European Commission officers. The Court of Auditors has only just begun to acknowledge that high-quality science is a risky business and some failures are inevitable. It is an encouraging sign that the new Research Commissioner was a long-term member of the court. She is now on the other side and will quickly learn that only mediocre research is risk free.

It is also clear that the bureaucratic burden Framework imposes is not its only weakness. An official assessment of Framework 6 highlighted a number of other failings, notably the inability to recruit enough partners from industry, which must be examined and addressed. Nor is the system sufficiently fair. Although its nominal success rate was much the same across Europe, the average value of contracts won by the 12 new member states was less than half the 250,000 euros for countries of the ‘old’ union.

And how does financial success in the programme correlate with the economic power of the member state?

Greek applicants to Framework 6 were as successful as the Swedes and Finns but the latter spend seven times more of their GDP on research than the Greeks.

Far too often, the people coordinating the programme appear to act like an old boys’ network made up of representatives from the large, non-industrial research institutions. Another flaw is a strong gender imbalance in participants, and there is also the issue of the time taken to negotiate a contract, on average about a year.

It is no surprise that the assessment

team made a number of recommendations aimed at producing a simpler, more logical and transparent process. For researchers there should be a shift from contracts to individual grants and for institutions from contracts to agreements based on full economic costs. Finally there should be efforts to evaluate the outcome and long-term impact of projects.

But it would be unwise to debate improvements to Framework without looking at the overall R&D scene in Europe. Neither will the habitual attacks made on the bureaucratic reputation of Brussels be helpful in achieving a sensible solution. We must examine ourselves and our own perspectives—after all, Framework funding is not ‘their’ money—it is ours, paid by our own taxpayers.

Indeed, many of the barriers to research are created by individual member states. So there are specific national rulings on: what is allowed (for example, stem cell research, genetically modified organisms and so on); who may and may not review grant applications; the limitations to transferring a grant; and on the criteria under which non-residents are eligible to apply for a grant.

In some countries, independent research councils provide most funding, while in others it is channelled through government-controlled agencies. And of course, there are dramatic differences in science expenditure of almost a full order of magnitude across Europe.

Framework could, and should, be more than just a fill-in between the various national or industry-sponsored research programmes. It is an important and much needed instrument, but to achieve its full potential, a radical new way of thinking is required.

So not only must there be a radical simplification of the administration procedures, we must also develop a new vision of what Framework can achieve. It can open new avenues that would otherwise be blocked off. It must create value and confer prestige on participants. This is an ambitious goal but one that all Europeans would understand, accept and support.

It is an achievable goal but only if given the highest political priority and fully supported by member states, the European Parliament and the Commission. It must become a pillar of the new strategy Europe 2020, the foundation of the Research, Education and Innovation Area, not just a European Research Area. Only then will Framework become a symbol of intellectual achievement and the quest for knowledge and scientific truth in a United Europe. And only then will the award of a European Framework grant become a researcher’s highest distinction and a career milestone.

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