

Trust and simplify

MEP and academic Maria da Graça Carvalho outlines the EU's response to demands to streamline research funding bureaucracy



CREDIT

A great deal of criticism has been levelled at the way the European Union handles funding for research. In particular, complaints centre on its bureaucratic complexity and the requirements for financial data that are imposed on applicants at the outset. Just recently, 13,000 researchers signed a petition demanding greater expression of trust and more simplicity in the criteria employed in applications for project financing. I myself witnessed some of the difficulties highlighted by signatories to the petition during my work as a researcher and university professor at the Technical University of Lisbon.

So what can be done?

The EU recognises that science, education and innovation are pillars of economic growth and job creation, and that Europe must invest in research if it is to develop new products and services that will create new sources of employment and growth. Ultimately this will render Europe more competitive and improve its quality of life.

Accordingly, research is at the heart of the EU's Europe 2020 initiative. At the moment, the European Parliament and the European Commission are working on the mid-term evaluation of the Seventh Framework Programme for Research. In addition, they have already started preparing the Eighth Framework Programme for Research, which will take effect on 1 January 2014.

Our main concern is to simplify the mechanisms involved. Over the years, the programme has grown in scope, both in terms of the applications received and the size of its budget. The swelling number of applications for funding has been met with a parallel growth in control mechanisms, in an attempt to ensure the proper use of EU funds. The

unfortunate result is that it is increasingly difficult for companies and other organisations to find their way through a labyrinth of rules, procedures and red tape. This is particularly the case for smaller organisations, including small and medium enterprises, high-tech start-ups and smaller institutes.

As an MEP, I am honoured to have been entrusted with the challenge of guiding a report on these difficulties through Parliament. In my opinion, the current system – which is essentially based on cost analysis – should be replaced by a system that places greater trust in the applicants. Consequently, I have proposed a two-pronged approach aimed at rebalancing the evaluation procedure.

First, I set out to simplify the monitoring of the financial aspects of funded projects. Second, I looked to reinforce the technical and scientific assessment process. This presupposes a process of peer review and, with it, the application of excellence-based criteria for assessment.

Of course, all financial transactions involve a degree of risk, but excessive concern about controlling this risk through administrative supervision can actually increase the overall cost of the process. It should be possible to tolerate higher levels of risk (thus streamlining bureaucratic control) while at the same time placing more confidence in participants from the scientific and business community.

We must strike a balance between trust and control – between risk taking and risk avoidance – in order to ensure the sound financial management of EU research funds.

Earlier this month, the motion for a resolution on simplifying the implementation of the Research Framework Programmes was voted on during the plenary session of the European Parliament and was adopted with an overwhelming majority: 553 votes in favour to 12 against, with seven abstentions.

However, this development is only the beginning of a long and difficult road ahead. Now we must make sure that our recommendations are properly implemented. In the process, the EU should be able to foster a culture of reciprocal confidence involving all stakeholders.

If we do, research and innovation will be enhanced, while making Europe a more attractive place to live and work.

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