

Business as usual for FP9? – Suggestions for a fresh look in light of the British referendum

Several weeks after the British referendum, which highlighted the widespread unease among European citizens with the current way of EU policy making, there is only a very limited follow-up in the discussions about European Research Policy and in the first contributions for the design of the next Framework Programme. This paper aims at stimulating such a debate by presenting some very first new lines of thinking with the double objective of providing constructive replies to growing public concerns and new avenues for developing and improving the next Framework Programme.

0. Intro

The rather unexpected outcome of the British referendum has generated a great turmoil in the European political arena. And although issues related to research policy were certainly not at the centre of the political debate in the UK, the question of how to handle the new situation and how to move on is very pertinent in European Research Policy.

In this specific context, the political debate in the first weeks following the referendum is almost entirely focused on the issue on how to minimise negative impact on the UK research system, including all kind of ideas on how the future relationship between the EU and the UK could be organised. These are crucial issues, but not the topic of this paper.

Instead, this paper tries shedding some light on a second, but by no means less important issue: How to develop a European Research Policy which draws its lessons from the massive mistrust expressed by the British voters, and aims at gaining confidence from the EU citizens. As it is somewhat worrying that this issue seems to be somewhat neglected in the post-Brexit debate on European Research Policy, this paper tries to show the importance of such a debate – and to present some first suggestions for change.

1. The growing unease with “Brussels”

It is definitely much too early to state with certainty what views and arguments British voters had in mind at the referendum, and as always one has to be careful with opinion polls carried out in other EU Member States. However, there seem to be clear indications for a growing unease among many European citizens with “Brussels” and an EU that is supposedly “failing to deliver” in many respects.

While the probably most prominent challenge in this context – migration - is definitely not primarily a research issue, there are other concerns which are also often quoted and which do relate – at least to some extent – also to European Research Policy.

For illustration, this paper takes four often cited concerns as starting point for some reflections on how a pragmatic response to these could be implemented in European Research Policy. The point here is not whether such concerns or claims are justified, correct or fair. The point here is to analyse whether European Research Policy, and most notably the next Framework Programme, could be responsive to these concerns without compromising fundamental quality standards.

2. “Complexity of the “Brussels” machinery”

There is a very healthy scepticism about simple solutions, well captured by the famous quote attributed to Albert Einstein *“Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.”*

Managing the largest multi-national research programme world-wide is in itself a complex issue, and the major efforts undertaken by the European Commission to substantially simplify the administrative dimension of the Framework Programme are widely recognized.

Unfortunately though, the structure and intellectual content of Horizon 2020 is probably more difficult to grasp than for any previous programme. Already last year, [THINK Piece 3/2015](#) presented a detailed analysis and came up with a number of observations and suggestions, which are also pertinent in the post-Brexit context.

Framework programmes are still largely based on top-down approach, which means that for every call there is a need to describe the content and expected impact of every open research task in full detail. The Work Programmes valid for 2016 listed in the “Documents” part of the Participants Portal add up to some 1.800 pages – and an estimate for the total volume of Work Programme documents valid during the seven years of Horizon 2020 would lead to a figure between 15.000 and 20.000 pages.

Is there an alternative¹?

As for individual researchers with the European research Council (ERC) grants, the collaborative projects funded under the Framework Programme could be also selected in a bottom-up approach, meaning that proposals could be submitted at any point in time for any topic covered by the Framework Programme.

¹ The word „alternative“ is used here in the original sense, meaning that there are (at least) two options. The argument here is that – contrary to the mainstream discussions - there is a real choice, not necessarily that the new option is necessarily the better one.

Such an approach has advantages and drawbacks, but it seems important to consider it in the emerging debate on the next Framework Programme as a serious option. Most importantly, such a new approach would allow for

- ✓ Truly innovative proposals, based on the creativity of the research community and not on the consensus among the insiders drafting the Work Programmes;
- ✓ Researchers to focus on developing the design and specificities of their project, without any red tape;
- ✓ The European Union to send a simple, but strong message to the public: Europe supports the best research teams in realising their ideas.

3. “Elitist and bureaucratic decisions”

Preparing the Work Programme texts is a lengthy and complex bureaucratic task, involving a great number of specialists and experts from inside and outside the Commission, so that both at the end of the process the choice and the scope of topics are, at least for the normal researcher, rather opaque and clearly not transparent.

Even more worrying is the obvious trend to actively influence the drafting process through proactive lobbying. As a matter of fact, the “open” competition for the best proposal at the evaluation and selection phase is to a considerable extent replaced by a prior “hidden” competition for the most efficient “positioning” of themes and keywords in the Work Programme texts. This might thus systematically favour the “establishment” (organisations familiar with the tacit rules of the game) over relative newcomers.

Is there an alternative?

If one accepts the idea that – contrary to the current practice – annual Work programmes with detailed thematic indications are by no means necessary to organise a Framework Programme, one could also immediately increase the transparency and openness of the system by banning all layers of expert circles and advisory groups from direct influence on the research content. This would also bar the road for the apparently most frequent and most efficient way to lobby for specific tasks or topics.

4. “Overambitious political objectives”

From the very beginning, European Research Policy was driven by ambitious political concepts and visionary ideas.

A prominent example from the past is the so-called Lisbon strategy, which as from the year 2000 aimed at making Europe *“the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”* – and became an important yardstick for all kind of research proposals.

For the current Horizon 2020 Framework Programme, the list of key objectives reads like this: *“The general objective of Horizon 2020 is to contribute to building a society and an economy based on knowledge and innovation across the Union by leveraging additional research, development and innovation funding and by contributing to attaining research and development targets, including the target of 3 % of GDP for research and development across the Union by 2020. It shall thereby*

support the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy and other Union policies, as well as the achievement and functioning of the European Research Area (ERA).”²

Contrary to the situation in the Member States (or, more generally, in all countries of the civilized world), public funding for research at the EU level is still not understood as a genuine task “per se”, but rather linked to the task of increasing the competitiveness of European industry and supporting European policies. This somewhat special context might explain (at least to some extent), why the history of European Research policy appears to be far more loaded with political overheads than any national research policy.

Looking at this picture from today’s perspective, there are two major concerns:

- Many of the political strategies in the past never did really take-off, and the real policy impact of Framework Programmes might actually be far more limited than official statements suggest. During the previous decade, thousands of projects in FP5 and FP6 argued at length about their relevance for the Lisbon strategy, and yet this ambitious political programme failed to deliver (and has so to speak disappeared from the political radar). Today, ten thousand of proposals highlight the importance of their research design for the growth and job strategy, and one can only hope that this time they will really contribute to a success story. Yet, one could have doubts whether all this is (again) a massive overselling of the (short-term) impact of research on key policy concepts.
- Many top researchers have an excellent understanding of the social and economic implications of their work. What they lack to a large extent, however, is a comprehensive knowledge of the various relevant EU policy initiatives. It is an alarming sign that even top institutions hire specialised consultants to draft the “relevance” and “expected impact” parts of their Horizon 2020 proposals. At best this is kind of a nuisance, but at worst this means that there is a gap between the real scientific agenda of a project and its alleged political relevance. One might actually get to a point where the overall system rewards a certain level of dishonesty in the evaluation and selection process.

Is there an alternative?

Instead of selecting research projects according to their promised contribution to all kind of European political objectives and strategies, one could simply select the best research projects available, hoping that these will generate in one way or another a long-term impact on society and economy.

One could argue about the risk that this new freedom for research will lead to an avalanche of projects which are kind of esoteric and lack any relevance for European society. But since impact and relevance will continue to be key elements of the selection process, the risk seems very limited. There should be, instead, important positive effects due to the much more open nature of the selection process, as there might actually be far more relevant issues to explore for the future than those covered by current EU policy strategies...

² Article 5(1) of Regulation (EU) No 1291/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing Horizon 2020 - the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020) and repealing Decision No 1982/2006/EC (OJ L347,20.12.2013, p.104)

Such an approach would imply a recognition that the massive number of today's European political initiatives (at the core of the current evaluation process) are actually of a somewhat limited importance when looking for long-term societal impact. It could be a courageous and honest reform to put the inherent scientific quality and relevance back at the centre of the evaluation process, and to skip the need for explicit alignment with current EU policy strategies.

5. "Insufficient added value for the European citizen"

The current paradigm in European Research Policy stipulates that research generates added value to the European citizens through the attainment of political objectives, the introduction of new products and treatments, and the generation of extra growth and new jobs.

Although this argument is a very valid one, it might not be the most suitable for political communication purposes:

- Methodologically, it is extremely difficult (not to say: impossible) to provide a truly convincing evidence for this claim, as the number of actors, interferences and interdependencies is such that there is no way to assign clear causalities over processes which are likely to last several decades.
- May-be even more importantly, the public awareness of and recognition for European research policy is limited (not to say: non-existent). Have you ever met (outside the very close inner circle) anyone who attributed a new product or a new drug to support from a previous Framework Programme? The majority of people in the EU simply ignore the existence of EU research funding – and hence have no idea about possible positive impacts on their individual life course.

Is there an alternative?

Against this bleak background, why not test a completely different way of looking at the issue, by just taking into account the obvious: Researchers in Europe are also citizens...

This sounds extremely trivial, but have we realised the full potential of this simple fact in the current policy design? Instead of insisting over and over that research needs political guidance to generate some very vague added value for future generations of European citizens, it would be far more straightforward that one objective of European Research Policy is to enable the almost 2 million researchers in Europe to fully realise their intellectual potential – for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of our society.

May-be the best way of putting this argument is to paraphrase the famous words of John F. Kennedy in his 1961 inaugural address: Similar to his request *"And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country"*, the change of perspective with regard to European research could be spelt out by stating: *"And so, my dear policy makers, ask not what research can do for European policies – ask what European policies can do for research ..."*

6. Outlook

There is apparently a deep alienation between a probably growing part of the European population and the actors shaping European policies in Brussels. A constructive dialogue might be further hampered by the fact that most actors in Brussels are very knowledgeable insiders with an excellent track record, whereas the “average” citizen has literally no clue about the subtle nuances of European policy shaping. Hence, there might be a certain temptation for the “Brussels crowd” to be confident in the established political concepts and to continue with a “business as usual” approach.

The ideas developed in this paper show, however, that on a certain number of issues the concerns expressed in the public could actually be used as starting points for new ways of looking at European Research Policy. A new Framework Programme aiming at more transparency, more competition and more freedom could be a good starting point for re-convincing the European citizens that investing in European research is a good investment.

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