

Framework Programme 'adds significant value', finds expert panel

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The expert panel, led by Nokia's vice president for technology policy Erkki Ormala, was asked to review the implementation and achievements of the Union's main research funding instrument, and make recommendations for improving both the programme and future EU research policy in general.

In its final report, published on 10 February, the panel places the review of the Framework Programme in the context of increased global competition and the gradual erosion of Europe's economic strength. As Dr Ormala noted at a press conference to present the report: 'Europe is at the crossroads. We are facing increasing international competition as well as the challenges of weak growth and unemployment. European industrial R&D [research and development] is strong, but it is growing faster outside our borders.'

To reverse this trend, the panel feels that Europe must meet four general challenges: to attract and reward the best talent, to create a positive environment for private R&D, to mobilise resources for innovation and growth, and to build trust in science and technology.

'The Commission's proposal to substantially increase the European research budget in the future is a welcome step in the right direction,' states the panel. However, if such a move is to succeed in strengthening Europe's knowledge base and competitiveness, it must be accompanied by increases in the R&D budgets of the Member States, the report adds.

The assessment found that the Framework Programme has enjoyed only modest success in directly contributing to innovation and the creation of new markets, however the panel concluded that this has never been its core focus. Rather, it aims to improve the structural foundations of the European research system as a whole. 'Given the budgetary limitations of the Programme [...] we consider the achievements [it has made] in this 'structural' role very important indeed,' states the report.

Based on its analysis, the panel recommends a number of actions to strengthen the Framework Programme. Crucially, the industrial orientation of the programme must be enhanced by making it more relevant to industry and by attracting the participation of more high-tech small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs).

At an operational level, the panel feels that efforts to streamline and simplify the administration of the programme must be vigorously pursued, and that the selection of instruments should be more flexible. 'It should be the research agenda that dictates the choice of instrument, and not the other way round,' stressed Dr Ormala.

Human resources and mobility actions should be extended in scale and scope, believes the panel, and science and society issues must continue to be addressed in a separate programme whilst also being embedded into all other priority areas.

Finally, the panel offered a number of recommendations for the future orientation of EU research policy. The construction of a European Research Area (ERA) must continue, it argues, with an increase in coherence between EU and national science policy. The Framework Programme must also be used to accelerate the process of integrating the Union's most recently joined Member States.

The panel welcomes the establishment of a European Research Council (ERC) blessed with sufficient resources to make a difference to the European science base and, finally, it supports the creation of a limited number of Technology Platforms to establish European leadership in emerging areas of technology.

Receiving the final report, the EU's Science and Research Commissioner Janez Potocnik welcomed the panel's 'thorough work'. He reminded journalists of the commitment he made during his hearing at the European Parliament to make simplification of the programme his top priority, and added that the Commission was in the process of establishing a 'sounding board' of SME representatives to help identify strategies to enhance the participation of smaller companies.

Mr Potocnik said was pleased that the panel had supported the Commission's call for a doubling of the research budget, and agreed that the move must go hand in hand with increased investment at other levels.

'We have to be clear just how much is spent at each level,' said the Commissioner. 'According to the Barcelona target, two-thirds of Europe's research investment should come from industry, with one-third coming from public sources. Of that last one-third, the EU Framework Programme currently constitutes only five per cent.'

'Doubling the EU research budget is not an attempt to move resources from the national to the European level, it is more about setting an example to Member States and industry of what should be done,' he argued.

'If we don't succeed in making Europe more attractive for research, then the negative trends in industrial research investment will continue. It is essential, therefore, to focus on the bigger picture outside the EU Framework Programmes as well,' the Commissioner concluded.

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