

Time for a quantum leap in EU research funding

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Opinion Plus

Europe needs more ambitious research funding, or risks losing precious knowledge, writes Rolf Tarrach.



Europe needs more ambitious research funding, or risks losing precious knowledge, writes Rolf Tarrach | *Photo credit: Fotolia*

The European Union is currently defining its priorities for the next decade. The scientific community takes this opportunity to remind European policymakers that research and innovation propel both societal progress and sustainable economic growth.

Universities are the unique places for production and dissemination of new knowledge, which are fundamentally important for society. Universities have been benefitting from, and contributing to the EU research framework programmes (FPs) for decades.

The EU framework programme is one of the most powerful instruments the EU has developed to

support excellent science and outstanding collaborative research across Europe and internationally. It has further structured and scaled up the scientific community's efforts and capacity to tackle large-scale, 'big picture' challenges which will define the way we live tomorrow.

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The FP has generated so much interest among stakeholders that one might say it has been too successful in attracting first class participation. At the same time, despite significant efforts, FP spending has not kept up with the demands of increasingly knowledge-driven societies.

The unprecedented low success rates in Horizon 2020 is a highly-debated subject in the sector and recognised as a problem by the European Commission. The scale of the issue becomes very apparent when looking at high-quality proposals (i.e. those that score above the threshold). Barely a quarter of these proposals obtain Horizon 2020 funding.

Can Europe really afford to accept that three-quarters of excellent research ideas are left unfunded? Such waste further jeopardises Europe's economic recovery and capacity to be a global scientific leader and trend-setter. The FP and the entire European research funding system are therefore exposed to a real efficiency problem, which must be addressed by national governments and by EU institutions.

In a call for '[Ambitious funding for excellent research in Europe post-2020](#) [4]', universities across Europe, through their umbrella organisation, the European University Association (EUA), urge all actors to step up investment in the next EU framework programme for research (2021-2028).

More investment is needed to fund exceptionally good research and close the participation gap that poses a big challenge to the European research area (ERA).

Far from lowering quality, more investment through broad, open calls will strengthen excellence, boost scientists' motivation and ensure support for more risk-oriented research. More investment will also mean more value for money for society, a more inclusive ERA, and ultimately a stronger economic growth.

Debates about the added value of investment in research at the European level should be a thing of the past. But the bone of contention clearly lies with the question of where this additional money should come from.

The time has come to go beyond a minor reshuffle - what Europe's future needs is a strategic reallocation of common resources. This calls for the alignment of the different research-related funds that exist in the EU's financial portfolio; and a genuine discussion on the contribution of European structural and investments funds to research and innovation.

Universities across Europe are familiar with these programmes and argue for more than increased 'compatibility' among them. To achieve the above-mentioned objectives and deliver efficiently, as President of the European University Association, I advocate for a quantitative and qualitative effort -

a quantum leap, I might say - in favour of a more ambitious European research funding. Europe can no longer afford 'business as usual' scenarios.

All superior quality, top-rated proposals from the framework programme must be funded. This could be achieved, for example, through the ring-fencing of resources within the structural funds, or better by shifting the available resources towards the future research framework programme. Let me be very clear: there should be neither compromise, nor underfunding of sterling research if Europe is to succeed.

About the author

Rolf Tarrach is President of the European University Association

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