

The next Framework Programme for Research and Innovation

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Martine Rahier on why true multidisciplinary would change the game for EU Research and Innovation.



Multidisciplinary team | Photo credit: Fotolia

When we think of how Europe can best invest in research and innovation, we often instinctively foresee putting our money behind new scientific discoveries and technological devices engineered to better our individual lives.

This is indeed important. However, as Europe begins to envision how the next Framework Programme for Research and Innovation can make an even bigger impact, we need to expand our attention to how it can better address Europe's important societal challenges.

At the European University Association (EUA), we believe that long-term public funding, such as that provided by the Framework Programme, is crucial to stimulate innovation based on fundamental and applied research.

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We also believe that true multidisciplinary, including the full integration of social sciences and humanities into the Programme's quest for innovation, is a must as Europe faces an abundance of challenges involving issues ranging from energy and climate change, to poverty and ageing societies, to migration and extremism.

The interim evaluation of Horizon 2020 shows that the inclusion of these disciplines is currently unbalanced and that further linkages among them and with and between the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields are greatly needed.

Only 22 per cent of the budget flagged for topics linked to social sciences and humanities goes to partners who work in these disciplines.

Meanwhile, some fields, such as economics and sociology, are well represented, while others, like humanities and the arts, are not. Moreover, EUA data shows that project partners from these disciplines often perform auxiliary roles in research projects, when they should be encouraged to take the lead.

Furthermore, expertise in social sciences and humanities is crucial not only in addressing societal challenges, but also in expanding our understanding of impact and innovation beyond oversimplified linear models. It is essential to take this into account.

"We must position the Framework Programme to foster a more nuanced understanding of the way innovation systems work and we must develop new ways to evaluate multidisciplinary research projects to capture their scientific and societal impact"

We must position the Framework Programme to foster a more nuanced understanding of the way innovation systems work and we must develop new ways to evaluate multidisciplinary research projects to capture their scientific and societal impact.

The main objective of the Framework Programme is to support research that produces innovation. Therefore, using indicators that focus only on technology makes little sense as they are not adequate to assess the potential for innovation and benefit for society.

Society readiness levels, rather, are hard to assess given the unpredictability of how discoveries can be implemented. If we are serious about integrating a vast range of disciplines into our societal missions, a more sophisticated set of indicators must be created aimed at capturing the complexity of the innovation system.

Additionally, clearer outlines of the general components of multidisciplinary in research projects are needed, as are user-friendly descriptions of requirements. The next Programme should promote and support smaller, more focused, multidisciplinary consortia and foster “disciplinary mobility”. Also, evaluation panels need to include reviewers with a variety of expertise.

Building a more competitive, prosperous and inclusive Europe requires a strong Framework Programme, capable of fully supporting and leveraging European research and innovation. As the debate develops on the Programme’s future, multidisciplinary is a keyword we cannot afford to overlook.

About the author

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The European University Association is the representative organisation of more than 800 universities in 47 European countries and 33 national rectors’ conferences. It represents the single largest beneficiary of the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (FP9). This month the Association released a precise set of [recommendations](#) [7] for FP9 after an extensive study involving its many members.

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