

EUROPEAN RESEARCH AREA BOARD

ERAB views on the contribution of FP7 instruments to the establishment of a genuine European Research Area

1. Introduction

Since the launch of the first Framework Programme (FP) 25(!) years ago, tens of thousands of transnational projects in successive FPs have prepared a solid foundation for the European Research Area (ERA). Any researcher can safely call any public or private colleague in Europe to set up collaboration: as the FP rules of the game are clear, these researchers can talk science and technology right away, without having to worry about the conditions and modalities of collaboration. In addition, matchmaking mechanisms are in place to facilitate partnering. The resulting collaboration fabric is a unique asset for Europe.

2. Contribution of FP7 instruments to the establishment of the ERA

The European Research Area Board (ERAB) wishes to highlight some FP7 instruments that are particularly contributing to the establishment of a genuine ERA:

FP7 Cooperation Programme

- Collaborative research continues to foster transnational partnerships.
- The 34 European Technology Platforms (ETPs) have produced widely recognised pan-European Strategic Research Agendas (SRAs). In addition to contributing to the definition of the themes and Work Programmes in the Cooperation Programme, some of the SRAs explicitly serve as references for the direction of national and regional research programs.
- The ERA-NET scheme supports coordination of national research programmes.
- To further integrate research activities under national programmes into real European research programmes, various approaches exist to enable co-funding of research projects by both Community and national funds in variable geometries:
 - the ERA-NET Plus scheme, with Community funding topping-up joint transnational funding;
 - actions under Article 169 of the Treaty, in particular Ambient Assisted Living (AAL) and Eurostars, with the Community financially participating in national programmes implemented jointly;
 - actions under Article 171 of the Treaty, in particular ARTEMIS and ENIAC, the two Joint Technology Initiatives in the ICT domain that combine resources from the Community, 20+ national programmes and the private sector in public-private partnerships.

Each of these actions is effectively creating a true ERA in its specific domain.

FP7 Ideas Programme

- By providing a bottom-up Europe-wide competitive funding structure, the European Research Council (ERC) is stimulating the very best individual teams to excel at a higher level than in national competitions.

FP7 People Programme

- The very popular Marie Curie actions effectively stimulate the transnational mobility of researchers as a tangible embodiment of the ERA.

FP7 Capacities Programme

- The “Research Infrastructures” activities optimise the use and development of existing research infrastructures and help create new research infrastructures of pan-European interest, with the ESFRI Roadmap (European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures) increasingly guiding national investments.
- The “Regions of Knowledge” activities foster transnational cooperation among regional knowledge clusters. Furthermore, they help regions to identify their comparative advantages, discover ways of specialize and invest accordingly in their research capacities, thereby increasing the overall efficiency of the ERA.
- Activities under “Research potential of Convergence regions” help unlocking the research potential in the EU’s “convergence regions” and facilitate their researchers to fully engage in the ERA.

3. Research Infrastructures

It was widely recognised under FP6 that Europe was falling behind its competitors in the field of major European Research Infrastructures. The ESFRI Roadmap published in 2006 articulated the needs of the research community and was universally accepted by Member States and the Commission. The new instrument to fund the preparatory phase of these infrastructures is very welcome. However, given the need to obtain intergovernmental agreements on both European and Global Research Infrastructures with respect to governance and funding, the final commitment to taking such projects forward is very slow and could be aided by a truly European model for governance, financing, etc. Furthermore, there is a brokerage role to be undertaken by a European Agency.

While the funding of transnational access to existing Research Infrastructures is welcome, the provision is limited and is insufficient to raise the aspirations of many young researchers from newer Member States. There has also been uncertainty about the continued funding of 13 consortia which has not helped European integration.

4. Towards a risk-tolerant and trust-based approach in research funding

Thanks to a fair degree of continuity with respect to FP6, FP7 had a smooth start, without any major problems. However, in spite of all efforts to achieve simplification, no real breakthrough could be achieved in cutting red tape. Also the multitude of instruments adds to the complexity.

The new Treaty – once ratified – will for the first time provide a legal basis for the European Research Area. Nevertheless, in view of the difficulties experienced in genuinely simplifying FP7, in setting up the aforementioned variable-geometry co-funding mechanisms and in establishing the JTIs as real public-private partnerships within the current institutional

constraints and legal complexity of the European Union, ERAB wonders whether the EU has the right instruments at its disposal to create a true European Research Area.

To improve efficiency, increase speed and reduce transaction costs, trust is a crucial element. However, the current institutional system seems caught in itself, paralysed by the political necessity to avoid mistakes rather than managing risks. Economically speaking, the associated transaction costs have grown completely out of proportion, with marginal costs of controls, checks & balances exceeding their marginal benefits. These transaction costs will only increase by adding yet another layer and outsourcing management activities of the Commission in FP7 to other entities (ERC, Executive Agencies, Joint Undertakings, etc.), if these entities basically remain subject to the same regulations as the Commission services itself.

Whereas in principle there are strong arguments for having much more research activities at the European level, the red tape that currently seems inherent to the European approach turns off too many researchers, keeps national governments from fully engaging in EU-level initiatives and makes the private sector reluctant to become involved in public-private partnerships if implemented as Community bodies.

For establishing a genuine ERA and making Europe a better place for research in the future, this is an issue deserving serious attention. Key constraints in this respect are the Financial Regulation applicable to the general budget of the European Communities and its Implementing Rules. For example, the personal financial liability for Staff officers induces a zero-risk, zero-trust attitude. Furthermore, the Financial Regulation seems less suited for dealing with public-private partnerships.

Use should therefore be made of forthcoming opportunities to revise this Financial Regulation and create a partial exemption for research and innovation, to account for a certain degree of risk that is inherent to these activities. In its Communication on the ex-post evaluation of the IST Thematic Priority in FP6 of September 4, 2008, the Commission advocated a risk-tolerant and trust-based implementation of the rules on research funding. Furthermore, in its European Economic Recovery Plan of November 26, 2008, the Commission announced a clarification of the legal framework for public-private partnerships for research investments. ERAB is of the opinion that these proposals would be important steps towards an effective and efficient ERA and calls upon the European Parliament and the Council to enable a risk-tolerant and trust-based approach in research funding, as well as real public-private research partnerships.