

EUA Response to the EC Communication: “Science and technology, the key to Europe’s future – Guidelines for future European Union policy to support research.”

I. The policy context

1. The 7th Framework Programme will be critical to the development of the Europe of 25 in the period 2007 -2013. Not only will the process of reaching agreement and the adoption of the proposals constitute one of the first challenges facing the new institutions of the enlarged Europe; through its different actions, FP7 will contribute significantly to meeting the Lisbon and Barcelona goals, and thus to supporting Europe’s transition to a knowledge based society.

2. This is also the goal of the Bologna process that seeks in parallel to create a European Higher Education Area across 40 countries by 2010¹. Viewed together, EU support through the Framework Programme and the wider Bologna Process represent a major investment in Europe’s education, training and research sector to meet the Lisbon and Barcelona goals, notably in combating the present lack of qualified manpower. It will be essential to ensure maximum synergies between these two processes.

3. It is in this policy context that the EUA welcomes the Commission’s proposals including the substantial increase in funding proposed, and wishes to situate its comments.

II. Strengthening the Research Effort means Strengthening the Role of Universities

4. The key role of universities was recognised by the Commission in the 2003 Communication on the Role of the Universities in the Europe of Knowledge and the April 2004 Liège follow-up Conference². EUA responded to the former and played an active role in the latter. Our views on the pivotal research and research training role of European universities have been articulated and widely disseminated in several recent policy statements³.

5. EUA strongly recommends that future EU support to research should take account of the outcomes of this reflection on the role of universities as research institutions widely distributed across the EU 25 and thus as natural partners in the strategic policy debate.

6. In addition, universities are strategically placed at the interplay of RTD, educational and regional development policies at both national and European level. Through their multiple mission that encompasses teaching, research training, basic research, knowledge transfer to foster university-industry partnerships and public policy development, and not least, informing a wider “knowledge society”, they have, as institutions, a unique role to play in

¹ Cf Berlin Communiqué preamble

² Statement on the Communication from the European Commission on “the Role of the Universities in the Europe of Knowledge” (May 2003).

³ Statement of the Research Role of Europe’s Universities (presented at the EC Conference on “The Europe of Knowledge 2020: a Vision for University-based Research and Innovation” Liège, 26-28 April 2004).

bridging the policy framework ‘gap’ between actions in relation to education, training, research and regional development in the Enlarged Union. Future research policy and practice should take account of this unique role and thus of the potential added value brought by the universities to the European research effort in a mid to long term perspective.

7. Europe’s universities are, of course, already actors in the Framework Programmes. However, at present the emphasis is on the involvement of individual researchers and teams of researchers. Universities as institutions could, and should be encouraged to contribute more significantly than in the past. The goal of this statement is to describe how this could be achieved by:

- highlighting the areas where universities as institutions have most to offer in respect of meeting the stated objectives of FPs;
- making specific recommendations for instruments that will enhance university participation in the future;
- underlining issues, in particular administrative and process related issues, that limit (full) participation at present.

III. Universities and the Six Major Objectives

8. EUA has comments on all the objectives outlined in the Guidelines. However we have defined priorities and thus concentrate our remarks on following areas that we believe to be of particular significance to universities, taking account of their contribution as institutions and that of individual university based researchers:

- support to basic research that targets principally researchers
- research training and career issues that engage both individuals and institutions
- infrastructure development for universities
- strengthening university cooperation at European level (ERA-UNIV-NETS)
- the role of universities in fostering regional development

Stimulating the creativity of basic research through competition between teams at European level

9. EUA endorses the overall objective of increasing support to the very best researchers and research teams at European level while insisting at the same time on the importance for Europe of helping all universities to improve their research performance, as this will ultimately enhance the contribution of universities from across the EU and beyond to the research and innovation process. Harnessing European potential in this way will be crucial in promoting balanced European development in the mid term.

10. EUA welcomes the proposal to establish a “European Research Council” (ERC) and has been a strong advocate of the need for this new funding mechanism to support basic research. EUA believes that this new mechanism should aim to further develop and support, using scientific criteria of excellence, all fields of research including the social sciences and the humanities.

11. EUA believes that a European Research Council (ERC) will directly strengthen the research function of universities – including ultimately those institutions that will not benefit directly in the short term - and their contribution to building the European Research Area.

EUA's July 2003 policy statement⁴ underlines in particular the importance of independence, of including all fields of research and of securing additional funding for this new mechanism while also drawing attention to the inherent risk involved of privileging strong universities in some countries and regions to the detriment of others where capacity needs to be further developed. This issue should be addressed by further facilitating the utilisation of EU Structural Funds to boost research infrastructure capacity where needed across the enlarged Union.

12. In relation to the governance of the ERC, EUA holds the view that universities as institutions – rather than represented by individual scientists – should be systematically involved, e.g. in the establishment and composition of a Senate, on internal decision-making structures, etc. On the key “operational issue” of funding procedures, EUA believes that ERC projects should be funded through grants to individual researchers or teams of researchers rather than the present EU contract procedures.

Making Europe more attractive to the best researchers

13. Without increasing the number of highly qualified graduates and well trained researchers Europe will not be able to meet the Lisbon objectives. Universities are crucial to this process given their quasi monopoly in relation to research training⁵. Moreover, experience shows that many of those who go on to become the best researchers working in the most research intensive universities will generally have been trained in a much more diverse group of European institutions; hence the need for all European universities to ensure the high quality of research training provided and to avoid concentrating funding in a small number of institutions.

14. For this reason enhancing the research training function of universities across Europe is a core concern of EUA⁶. EUA therefore supports strongly both the extension of the “Marie Curie” actions and the new emphasis placed on forging strategic policy linkage between these mobility actions and the development of European scientific careers. This will also promote synergies with the Bologna Process which includes a new Action Line linking the EHEA and the ERA and specific reference to the doctoral level as the third cycle in higher education. EUA believes that doctoral programmes form both the last stage of the educational process but also, crucially, the first stage of a research career.

15. EUA thus supports the Commission proposals for a “European Researchers Charter” and “Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers.” From their unique dual perspective as employers with a responsibility for the professional development of their teachers’ and researchers’ careers, and as “competitive environments” which must create the conditions to attract researchers and foster their ability to build research project collaborations and networks, Europe’s universities will be a key partner in following up this important initiative.

16. Universities similarly have an important role to play in further promoting the international dimension of the “Marie Curie” mobility schemes (through increased exchange with other parts of the world) given their substantial experience (based upon historical and cultural linkages) of hosting and attracting international researchers.

⁴ EUA Policy Statement on the establishment of a European Research Council, July 2003

⁵ EUA response to the Communication on the role of Universities in the Europe of Knowledge, May 2003

⁶ Graz Declaration, July 2003

17. From the perspective of the universities EUA furthermore recommends:

- increasing funding for Marie Curie actions in view of the present significant oversubscription;
- according a certain priority to research and training networks, but keeping the present flexibility of formats for fellowships;
- Supporting the development of European graduate schools as a particular innovative mechanism for concentrating/reorienting doctoral training to deal with new needs.

Developing Research Infrastructures of European Interest

18. EUA views the creation of the European Strategic Forum on Research Infrastructure (ESFRI) as a useful focal point and policy forum for Commission actions in research infrastructure support. Europe's universities house many types of research infrastructures in all fields of science, both large and small, and their coverage, needs and collective capacities should be assessed within the overall framework of developing a viable European strategy.

19. In a broader sense EUA believes that in future EU support should include some provision for covering the costs of maintaining university infrastructure. We believe this to be important in maximising the participation of universities and taking account of the historic under-financing of infrastructure in many parts of Europe.

20. Finally, following on from our remarks on the ERC (para.11 above), EUA also welcomes the proposal to strengthen policy complementarities between the use of the EU research budget and the Structural Funds (under the "Convergence" objective) which is particularly important in relation to research infrastructure renewal and up-grading in EU new member states.

Improving the coordination of national research programmes

21. The proposal to extend ERA-NET coordination activities to include financial support for research activities has potentially important implications for Europe's universities as many of the research projects of which these "national programmes" are comprised are based in universities. If these programmes are able to compete for additional European funds in future, universities, as institutions, will necessarily be involved in terms of administering the corresponding funding applications and contracts, in addition to those related to other Framework Programme mechanisms. It will therefore be of the utmost importance to ensure coherence across these various funding mechanisms.

22. Given the governance and management challenges universities face in trying to respond to EU policy and research funding instruments on the one hand and their considerable potential in contributing collectively as institutions to the European research effort on the other, EUA strongly recommends that university networks should in future be considered as eligible partners in the ERA-NET scheme. Such "ERA-UNIV-NETs" would address governance issues pertaining to the research mission of universities, such as university-industry collaborations, university financing and research costs, research career development and recruitment, research infrastructure support and maintenance, financial management and accounting, etc. Such coordinated sharing of knowledge, policy

management experience and good practices would serve to strengthen “trust” and cooperation between universities at European and regional level.

Creating European Centres of Excellence through collaboration between laboratories

23. Many universities (in both old and new EU member states) cannot easily marshal the necessary “own resources” to apply for FP new instruments because of competing demands for these human and material resources. Thus university-based researchers are not always able to exploit fully the opportunities available. Thus, a “level playing field” does not exist regarding the conditions under which the three stated players (i.e. research centres, universities and companies) can enter effectively into transnational collaborations. Moreover, the current range of the research instruments is not necessarily suited to the needs of all sciences. In particular, large scale collaborative projects and networks are not adequate to achieve the greater contribution we would welcome of the social sciences and humanities.

24. EUA welcomes the overall findings and recommendations of the “Marimon Report”⁷ in this respect and is willing to offer advice on the implementation of these recommendations in as far as they relate to the enhancement of the participation of universities in FP7.

Launching European Technological Initiatives

25. This objective appears to be targeted towards large-scale technological projects involving industry and major research institutions. Universities are not specifically mentioned and thus further clarification would be needed for universities to be able to assess their potential contribution. More generally, universities need encouragement to develop a strong entrepreneurial culture, something often inhibited at European level by the diversity of national legislation at play. The legal status of universities differs, for example, from one European country to another as does their possibility of receiving private funding and /or attracting risk capital.

26. Finally, on the “Science and Society” dimension of “technology platforms”, universities will have a valuable role to play as stakeholders at the interface with the public-at-large and “public interest” groups, as forums of exchange and dialogue on the socio-economic implications of technological developments.

“Raising Research Performance throughout the Union”

27. EUA welcomes the proposal to achieve greater complementarity between FP7 and the European Research Development Fund (ERDF) with a view to strengthening existing university-based regional innovation networks (university/industry/SME partnerships) and developing new ones. Given the crucial role universities already play in supporting regional development, EUA recommends that the experience and working practices of successful existing networks be taken into account before any new “intermediary bodies between universities and SMEs” (cf. § 34 of the Guidelines) are created. Instead of creating a new intermediate layer, universities should rather be encouraged to develop further direct relations with SMEs.

⁷ Marimon, Evaluation and Effectiveness of the New Instruments of Framework Programme VI, June 2004

“Doing Better to do More” - Removing Obstacles to Achieving Strengthened University Participation in Framework Programmes.

28. EUA welcomes the commitment to revise and simplify the FP regulatory, financial and administrative provisions which should help to reduce the costs of universities' engagement in EU research activities and notes that “externalised management” is proposed for the operation of certain components of FP7. From the perspective of Europe's universities, it is hoped that this will be implemented in the continued spirit of improving FP accessibility, a fundamental precondition for achieving a viable and attractive European Research Area. EUA believes that present priorities should be focused on fully involving the new Member States in the range of FP instruments and activities.

29. Towards the goal of streamlining administration and delivery mechanisms (presently viewed as an over- bureaucratic process for universities generally and off-putting for smaller players) EUA wishes to underline specifically the drawbacks of the single stage evaluation process which means that applicants have to spend a disproportionate amount of effort in preparing applications. We support demands for a two stage process but recognise the need also to ensure that such a process does not increase the time lag between submission of applications and final decisions.

30. Finally, and most importantly, the proposed FP7 budget increase should be used as an opportunity to address the key issue of how to improve the financial basis and viability of university participation in EU research activities. While to move from partial to full costs funding of EU research activities should be an ultimate goal, the short term implications of such a move would likely to be fewer projects being funded. In the medium term, however, steps towards full cost funding could be further explored valuably (and bearing in mind the present considerable differences between accounting and funding systems across Europe) in a framework of “partnership arrangements” at EU and national/regional levels in support of FP7 projects.

2 November 2004