

presidents of crasp, hrk & uuk **view from the top**

Get the balance right between excellence and cohesion

Decision-makers face tough choices this year as they ponder the future of EU research and innovation funding. As both competition from R&D outside the EU and fiscal constraints become increasingly intense, it is crucial that European research funding has a clear orientation.

It should be allocated unambiguously on the basis of excellence. Only the best applicants, having undergone strict international peer review, should receive funding. This criterion already underpins the decisions of the European Research Council and is preferred by industry in collaborative research. If Europe is to continue to aspire to be a globally competitive knowledge economy, the spirit of competition for European research funding must not be watered down.

The ERC embeds the principle of excellence at the heart of European research, raising the standards of national research efforts across Europe by providing clear and inspirational examples and targets for frontier research. Funding for the ERC should be substantially increased.

At the same time, it is vital to recognise that, while universities everywhere provide for the innovation of tomorrow, the research performance and capabilities of European states and regions vary, as do the missions of their universities. New solutions for European research need to strike a balance between support for excellence and capacity building, so as to maintain the dynamism of the whole European university system. One solution is to strengthen European support for regions that have universities as key partners in the knowledge triangle—particularly where there is a clear integrated vision for the development of participating universities and the region.

While the EU Structural Fund goes some way towards meeting this need, the experience of universities is that too little of the considerable funds available for European regions are spent on the development of the research and innovation potential of universities. In addition, the structural funds come with a heavy bureaucratic burden, adding European financial rules on top of existing national and regional ones—to the detriment of the applicants. European co-funding is in practice an enormous financial drag for higher education institutions if they are

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not being fully supported by their regions or other partners. Co-funding should be further simplified and made more flexible to allow for the combination, rather than the build-up, of different national and European funds in regional knowledge triangles.

The development of the next EU research-funding programme also provides an opportunity to improve synergies between funding for the regions and EU funding programmes for research and innovation. Differences in auditing requirements, legal wording and structure represent a major barrier to taking advantage of synergies between programmes. While the Commission's aspirations to harmonise particular programmes through its proposed funding framework are promising, more could be done to clarify and facilitate synergies between the funding streams proposed for the next framework programme and the structural funds.

One step in this direction would be for the Commission to provide more explicit guidance on how countries and regions can use structural funding and other resources to build research capacity.

Capacity building in the regions should be driven by the need to realise potential and develop excellence. Therefore, decisions about structural funding should be made through criteria that are quality oriented and meet the highest possible standards. This would help to ensure that the increase asked for by universities in the share of structural funding earmarked for research and innovation would bring the best results in the regions—and would help to widen the group of institutions that are globally competitive and attractive.

Finally, it is crucial that the strategic priority the EU recently attributed to R&D is reflected in the Multi-annual Financial Framework. Competition from other regions of the world is growing rapidly—India has set out plans to double R&D spending, and China has increased its total R&D investment by 10 per cent each year for the past 10 years.

Only by committing long-term resources to support world-class research and build research capacity across Europe can the EU remain competitive. The EU must act strategically by investing now in R&D.

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