

COMMENT | The big picture



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Agreement on Horizon Europe creates a chance to ask what EU research policy is for

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The European Parliament and European Council have reached a partial agreement on the contours of Horizon Europe, the next EU R&D programme. That is good news, as it will probably shield the programme from the uncertainties that a new Parliament and European Commission are bound to throw up.

The agreement also buys a few months of relative quiet that should be used to reflect on some themes that are too often ignored.

European debates on science, technology and innovation are hedged in by self-imposed limitations. Abandoning or redefining programmes is notoriously difficult, for example, as the diffuse borders between Horizon Europe's missions, the Joint European Disruptive Initiative, the European Institute for Innovation and Technology and the Joint Technology Initiatives show. But there are deeper issues at stake.

What, for example, should a truly European-level research and innovation policy seek to achieve? "European added value" is not a good enough answer. Clearer answers would come from asking what can only or best be done at the level of the EU.

The European Research

Council falls squarely into that category. The ERC should be independent, in the way of the United States National Science Foundation or European national funding agencies. That is, its leadership should be in control of the organisation and able to operate independently from the Commission at the global level.

The ERC's success and growing budget challenges other European research funders to raise their game. National funding agencies should be thinking harder about their role. And the ERC's very rigorous peer-review system highlights the lack of such rigour in other parts of the Framework programme.

Allowing potential reviewers to nominate themselves without serious vetting, as is the practice outside the ERC, is asking for trouble. A recent report from the European Alliance for Social Sciences and Humanities attributes, probably rightly, the continued low participation of researchers from the social sciences and humanities to a lack of reviewers from these disciplines.

The planning and management of large research infrastructures should also be in the EU-level category, but isn't. Member states do not want to cede

control, and the Commission has not pressed its case. Having the EU fund part of investment and operational costs would ease the usually thorny and protracted negotiations between governments and funding agencies.

The survey and strategy laid out in the roadmap from the European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures provides a rationale for choosing the large infrastructures deserving EU support. As a corollary, national funding agencies should assume responsibility for smaller and medium-sized research infrastructures.

As a flipside to questions of EU-level policy, another neglected debate concerns enhancing and accepting differentiation. Some consequences of Europe's diversity are seldom discussed, let alone accepted. Discussions about the future of European universities—or rather, tertiary education institutions—rarely touch on the need to increase differentiation.

Why is it so often taken for granted that a university has to offer the full stack of bachelors, masters and PhD degrees? Why is the ambition almost always to be a research university? Why doesn't Europe

have, with few exceptions, the equivalent of the US liberal arts or community colleges?

More variety would improve Europe's ability to attract students and staff globally. It would also be much more sustainable: there is neither the funding nor staff to maintain a diluted system where all want to be equal. One need not copy the US system of tertiary education to be impressed by its vitality.

Europe's regions are also very different. Smart specialisation, which seeks to build an Innovation Union by having regions focus on their particular economic and industrial strengths, is one answer to the issues raised by these divides. It is a good answer as far as it goes, but the differences between European regions are probably too great to be overcome for such a general strategy to be very useful.

A region's place in the economic and social fabric of the EU is more than a matter of its place on an axis of innovation. There are many more dimensions on which to base and build regional well-being. Identifying and acting on them will be a difficult political discussion, but Europe's future depends on our ability to engage frankly with the question of what Europe is. 🗣️



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