



Research commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn faces calls for drastic changes to the EU funding system.

POLICY

EU advisers urge funding reform

The European Commission should free its Framework programme from political interference and red tape.

BY NATASHA GILBERT

Europe's multi-billion-euro research programme needs significant reform to slash bureaucracy and ensure continued support for cutting-edge science. That's the verdict of the top science advisory group to the European Commission (EC). As the executive body of the European Union (EU), the EC oversees the €50.5-billion (US\$69.3-billion) Framework funding programme.

In a set of unpublished recommendations made to the EC in December, and now seen by *Nature*, the European Research Area Board (ERAB) says that the management of Framework funds should be devolved to "independent institutions at arm's length of Commission and Member States influence". Unless there is a "drastic" change in how the programme operates, it adds, "Europe's ability to compete or cooperate in the global environment will significantly diminish".

The warning comes at a crucial time for the EC, as it prepares to launch a public consultation of stakeholders on the successor to the current Seventh Framework Programme (FP7), Europe's chief research-funding mechanism, which ends in 2013 (see 'Planning a Framework').

Under FP7, the EC organizes research agendas through ten priority themes, such as energy and transport. ERAB suggests that agencies modelled on the European Research Council (ERC) — an EU initiative set up in 2007 to award research grants solely on the basis of excellence — should instead be set up to support these priority research areas.

ERAB says that the EC, as well as the member states of the EU, would continue to have a role in defining the proposed agencies' overall strategy, including research priority areas and their budgets. But the agencies would execute the strategy and determine which proposals would receive

funding, with success judged on the delivery of new discoveries, insights or technologies.

The board acknowledges that some of these research programmes would probably have a higher risk of failure than many FP7 ventures, and says that the agencies would therefore need managers with "considerable responsibilities and powers" who are not restricted by "unnecessary bureaucratic constraints". John Wood, ERAB's chair, declined to comment on the recommendations ahead of their publication.

HUGE HASSLE

ERAB's recommendations are likely to be welcomed by many of Europe's researchers, who have long deplored the EC's excessive bureaucracy and risk-averse approach to research funding (see *Nature* 463, 999; 2010). "There is a lot of administrative work. Proposals have to be very detailed and precise. This is not always how science works," says Antoine Peters, a molecular biologist at the Friedrich Miescher Institute for Biomedical Research in Basel, Switzerland. Peters adds that he has been put off applying for funding from the programme because "it is such a hassle. I avoid it if I can. I'd rather go for national or local funding."

The European Association of Research and Technology Organisations, a Brussels-based trade group, supports the idea of independent agencies managing research programmes, says Pauline Bastidon, the group's policy officer. In particular, it would like to see an agency, similar to the ERC, in charge of funding for applied research and innovation, she adds.

But Luke Georghiou, vice-president of research and innovation at the University of Manchester, UK, does not think that shifting responsibility to independent agencies is a panacea, and points out that the ERC has still had to battle EC bureaucracy. He proposes retaining the overall shape of the programme but with major simplifications, including more flexibility in calls for proposals.

An EC spokesman declined to comment on ERAB's report, adding that it would be taken into account during the consultation. That process will kick off when the EC releases a green paper outlining its proposals for the next Framework programme on 9 February. But a draft of the green paper, seen by *Nature*, may disappoint research leaders who were expecting to see a set of defined ideas. Instead, it lists 24 broad questions to be addressed in constructing the programme, but offers no firm options. For example, the document asks whether new rules could help to simplify the programme while giving it flexibility, but fails to suggest what these rules would look like.

"The green paper doesn't say anything," says a senior EU science official involved in Framework discussions, who asked not to be named, as commission rules forbid them from commenting on unpublished documents. "It makes me think the commission is not interested in having a proper debate." ■

PLANNING A FRAMEWORK

Consultation launches on the future of EU research funding	▶ 9 FEB 2011
Consultation closes	▶ MAY 2011
Results announced	▶ JUN 2011
Proposals presented by EC for next Framework programme (FP8)	▶ END 2011
Proposals negotiated by EC, EU member states and European Parliament	▶ 2012
FP7 finishes; FP8 begins	▶ 2013-14

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