



Can Europe build a framework for success?

The European Framework programme, one of the world's largest science funders, has improved its reputation. Not by enough, says **Colin Macilwain**.

Last week saw the passing of European scientists' best chance to help shape their single largest source of funding: the European Union's Framework programme. Their efforts are unlikely to bequeath a system fit to tackle the continent's pressing needs.

The consultation exercise that ended on 20 May is part of a convoluted process to design the Framework programme that involves lobbyists from science and industry, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the member states. It may prove unable to give the Framework the sharp focus it so badly needs. Too many trade-offs and compromises will, as always, see incremental change to a programme that is crying out for a radical overhaul.

The Framework is often derided for supporting second-rate projects, but much of what it now supports is excellent. This year, it will hand out more money for research than any other programme in the world, with the exception of NASA and the US National Institutes of Health.

James Heckman, a Nobel-prizewinning US economist, for example, will soon be spending much of his time in Ireland, having won a grant from the European Research Council (ERC) — part of the Framework — to study health economics at University College Dublin. This doesn't reverse a century of academic brain-drain west across the Atlantic, but it is a start.

The main problem remains the deficiencies in the largest part of the Framework programme, which supports targeted research projects carried out by partners from at least three nations (see *Nature* **464**, 349; 2010). Scientists have long grumbled that many of these projects are awarded large (sometimes very large) grants not because of their research excellence, but because political winds blow in their direction.

The Eighth Framework Programme (FP8) will run from 2014 to 2020, and is expected to cost around €70 billion (US\$98 billion). So what do Europe's scientists hope to get from it? Judging by their published submissions (see <http://go.nature.com/oipih0>), they want — surprise, surprise — more money, more emphasis on excellence, simplified procedures, and a support structure for major new facilities.

Let's look at each of these objectives in turn. The outlook for increased funds is forlorn. The seven-year budget is being planned at the worst possible time and will be set in 2012/13 — the time of maximum austerity for most of the 27 national governments footing the bill.

'Excellence' in this context means primarily the ERC, which was set up as part of FP7 to distribute grants purely on the basis of scientific merit. But questions remain about ERC governance; it has no director-general, and its expansion will be resisted by the large number of member states who can't really compete for ERC grants.

Advocates of 'simplification' often call for a trust-based system with less paperwork and auditing. But not everyone in Brussels agrees that researchers can always be trusted. One reason for this is that projects need multiple partners to win funding, yet, once handed the money, not all of those partners pull their weight. Add vivid memories of fraud allegations against former research commissioner Edith Cresson, and it's no wonder the commission's auditors want to keep a keen eye on the Framework programme.

There seems to be wide agreement that the programme could help with infrastructure. But, at present, there is no established mechanism to build and run European facilities, resulting in tricky negotiations between up to 27 nations for every proposed facility — and a recurrent impasse between the technologically advanced and less-advanced nations on who should host them.

These, then, are what scientists want from FP8. The commission, alas, seeks something else.

The first thing it wants is 'innovation', the watchword for Máire Geoghegan-Quinn since she took over the research directorate — now the research and innovation directorate — early last year. Like many politicians, she seems hazy on the distinction between research and innovation, and reluctant to acknowledge limits in the potential of state actions to stimulate the latter. The commission's other goal is to align research programmes more closely with 'cohesion' — Eurojargon for helping poor countries on the European Union's periphery to catch up with its Germanic core.

Such an alignment could pull Framework money away from excellence and the expansion of the ERC. This fight will be at the heart of the

coming tussle over FP8. It is a fight that rich member states are likely to win, and so keep research funding largely separate from cohesion goals. That will please well-resourced scientists in places such as the United Kingdom and Germany, but anger their colleagues to the south and east.

A future strategy in Europe marked by continuity rather than change will be good enough for most grantees — but not good enough for those, including Geoghegan-Quinn, who argue that Europe faces a massive competitiveness crisis that can only be averted by a step-change in its innovative capacity.

Geoghegan-Quinn is right to demand drastic change, but wrong on the direction it should take. Instead of chasing the impossible goal of an 'Innovation Union' by broadening the Framework's reach, Europe should look to the model of the US National Science Foundation, further develop the ERC, and focus more on backing the best people with the best ideas in engineering, the humanities and all branches of science. ■

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