

UK Higher Education Europe Unit Statement

UK Higher Education Europe Unit Statement on the Seventh Framework Programme (2007 to 2013) (COM(2005)119)

Introduction

1. This statement has been produced by the UK higher education (HE) sector Europe Unit and Universities UK. It represents the views of Universities UK, including Universities Scotland and Higher Education Wales, the HE funding councils for England, Scotland and Wales and the Standing Conference of Principals. The UK HE Europe Unit also works closely with the UK Research Office (UKRO) on FP7. The paper provides general comments on the Commission's proposal and specific comments on the four programmes (cooperation, ideas, people, capacity) set out in Article 2 of the Commission's proposal. The paper also refers to the simplification issues dealt with in the Commission's Staff Working Document accompanying the FP7 proposal. This position statement may be updated or amended as further proposals for FP7 are put forward.

General Comments

2. The UK HE sector welcomes the European Commission's proposal for FP7, which has the potential to contribute significantly to the achievement of the European Union's Lisbon goals and the development of the European Research Area. In particular, the UK HE sector endorses the Commission's proposal to double the budget for FP7 using EU (rather than national) resources. UK higher education institutions (HEIs) have a strong track record of winning EU research funding which has contributed significantly to their ability to create and apply knowledge¹.
3. The UK HE sector urges EU Ministers to reach agreement on the EU's financial perspectives for 2007-2013 during the Luxembourg Presidency to ensure that a strengthened FP7 can enter into force as planned in 2007 without disruption to EU R&D.

Sustainability of HE research in Europe

4. The UK HE sector strongly believes that ensuring the financial sustainability of the research base is of prime importance.

Chief Executive
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¹ In the Fifth Framework Programme, UK universities won 25% of the total funding available for that sector.

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5. UK higher education institutions have embedded emerging good practice in costing and pricing into their management processes. This followed widespread recognition that all research in universities has been historically under funded, which has limited HEI's ability to reinvest effectively in their infrastructure and facilities. By July 2005, all should have implemented the Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC), which will help them to identify the full costs of activities. This will mean that institutions should be in a better position to implement sustainable strategies and ensure that they are investing sufficiently in the physical and human and intellectual infrastructure at a rate adequate to maintain long-term capability. In England this is now a requirement within the Financial Memorandum between HEIs and the Funding Council.
6. To achieve the goal of a sustainable research base all funders need to recognise the need for institutions to invest in the future of the research base, and therefore will need to meet more of the costs of the activities they fund.
7. In the UK, although the principle of cost-sharing in EU funded research is well-established and understood, the proportion of contribution offered by the Commission (depending upon activity type) now compares unfavourably with the proportion offered by other national funders who have recently increased their percentage to help ensure financial sustainability. Hence participation in EU funded research now appears to be the least sustainable option for UK HEIs and there is a danger of researchers turning away from Europe.
8. Under FP7 the Commission should look to fund research on a more sustainable basis. This will ultimately entail funding current volumes at higher levels. If the sustainability agenda is not supported the Lisbon research goals will ultimately be achieved at the expense of the infrastructure in universities.

Programme I – Cooperation

9. We welcome the themes as broadly defined in the document, and are reassured by the commitment that these will effectively adapt to meet evolving needs. We also welcome the continuity between those instruments in FP6 and those proposed in FP7.
10. In the past, Networks of Excellence (NoEs) and the concept of integration have not been well communicated. They have also been difficult to manage because of this initial lack of clarity and the number of organisations involved. This can act as a disincentive for industrial companies, as well as academics, who are unlikely to want to take on the responsibility of managing a project that could feature up to 50 or 60 partners. There is a need for a continued process of support for the implementation of NoEs to ensure that they contribute to achieving

the stated aims of structuring and strengthening the European Research Area. Many of these concerns also apply to Integrated Projects (IPs).

11. By their nature some disciplines are better suited to large scale NoEs than others, and it may need to be recognised that NoEs cannot be applied on a one size fits all basis to all discipline areas.
12. Problems due to restrictions on which instruments are eligible under particular research themes have been particularly detrimental in the past; therefore greater flexibility in this area would be beneficial. The most effective instruments are those that the research teams select and not those that have been pre-allocated by DG Research.
13. The UK HE sector considers instruments that encourage large-scale collaborative projects are not always the best models for support of projects in the social sciences or humanities and some parts of the physical sciences (such as maths and some parts of physics).
14. European research and development has a vital role to play in increasing collaboration with leading researchers worldwide and we welcome the greater focus on this in the proposals.

Programme II – Ideas

15. The UK HE sector welcomes the proposal for a European Research Council (ERC), so long as it is funded with additional money, to support projects on the basis of excellence proposed by researchers from all disciplines, as judged by peer review. The UK HE sector looks forward to engaging in the ongoing debate on the detail of how the ERC will function, particularly in developments to ensure the ERC has the necessary autonomy.
16. Funding for the ERC projects will need to ensure that a greater proportion of the costs are met. This will ensure that it is attractive to researchers across Europe and financially sustainable for institutions.

Programme III – People

17. The UK HE sector welcomes the Commission's proposals to strengthen the human potential in research and technology across Europe by increasing funding for human resources and mobility activities. This has been one of the most successful elements of previous framework programmes and plays a crucial role in the UK research base. We would therefore welcome continuity in this area.
18. It is important that the mobility needs of social scientists and researchers in the arts and humanities are supported in FP7.

19. The diversity in duration, purpose and delivery of doctoral level programmes in Europe should be protected. European level recommendations concerning “European qualifications” and access to doctoral programmes should remain flexible and avoid the development of rigid European requirements, such as a European doctoral level qualification or label².

Programme IV – Capacity

Infrastructures

20. We welcome the move in FP7 to ensure the optimisation of the use of research infrastructures. It will be important to ensure continuity of funding from FP6 to FP7 and beyond. The increase in the length of the duration of funding will help with the planning of long-term infrastructure projects, but it must also be recognised that some large scale infrastructure projects may well cover time scales that do not fit in with the FP funding cycle.

SMEs

21. We welcome the focus on SMEs in the proposals. The long timescales for decision making and complex administrative arrangements of the current Framework Programme have acted as a disincentive for SME involvement. It is vital that the bureaucracy and administrative requirements of bidding under the Framework Programme are reduced to encourage SME involvement. The time between bid preparation and contract commencement is currently very long, reducing this would also help.
22. Consideration needs to be given to the balance between concentrating new resources on encouraging SME participation in RTD projects and support that can encourage SME participation in the development or commercialisation of the results of RTD projects.

Regions of knowledge

23. The role of the Commission will be to facilitate the growth in these areas rather than dictate it. It must also be understood that the impacts of HEIs are pervasive and that there is not always coherence in the concept of the regions in regard to higher education. In Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland there is some coherence between geographical boundaries, associations of HEIs, development agencies, and other devolved or local government bodies and agencies. In England, however, geographical boundaries between regions are such that natural

² The European Parliament’s Resolution on science and technology – Guidelines for future EU policy to support research (2004/2150(INI)), paragraph 19, included proposals for “*harmonisation of researchers’ careers and working conditions at EU level*”, “*clear common standards at EU level for access to academic careers*” and a “*European qualification*” for researchers. Such proposals run counter to the intergovernmental Bologna Process to create the European Higher Education Area by 2010. The UK HE sector prefers a flexible approach to promoting mobility at doctoral level in Europe. The above measures would create restrictive and burdensome requirements at European level and would threaten the diversity of European higher education.

groupings of institutions are separated, while some areas within several regions are without any HE institution.

24. It is not clear from the proposals how the new Framework Programme will interact with the Structural Funds and whether participation will be restricted to Objective 1 areas only. Better communication between the Framework Programme and Structural funds is to be welcomed in principle, but support to research through the Structural Funds should not be provided to the detriment of infrastructure and human resource development elsewhere in the FP7.

Comments on Commission Staff Working Document on Simplification of FP7

25. The UK HE sector welcomes the Commission's commitment to simplification of EU research support through the three principles outlined in the paper. Efforts to provide continuity in FP7 with FP6 are also welcome. We would, however, like to see greater focus in the document on how the reforms are being driven to meet the needs of applicants. Providing a timely and efficient service to applicants should be a key driver for this simplification exercise.
26. The UK HE sector endorses the extension of the two-stage submission procedure to any relevant call for proposals. The proposed introduction of an electronic registration desk to rationalise requests for information from participants is encouraging. It will be important that all Commission staff are aware of the existence of the registration desk and use it consistently. We have some concern that help desks dealing with project management issues cannot replace an experienced desk officer who has familiarity with the project.
27. The proposal to externalise the management of the Marie Curie actions and other logistical and administrative tasks to an executive agency outside of DG Research has the potential to improve the administration and service delivery of FP7. It is vital that staff in any external agency are properly trained to deal with the volume of applications and communicate with participants effectively and consistently.
28. We would strongly endorse a move towards ensuring greater flexibility without excessive reporting and micro-management by the Commission. The current 'web of accountability' is too constraining. It is vital that accountability arrangements do not lead to an increase in transaction costs and work against autonomy.
29. If the Commission is to achieve the simplification of FP7 it may need to consider putting a greater emphasis on accountability for outcomes rather than exclusively for inputs.
30. We have concerns over the Commission's proposal to increase lump sum financing. Whilst this would provide a means to facilitate simplification for the Commission it is not conducive to appropriate budget planning and management by participants. The costing and pricing of



research is currently relatively straightforward for applicants and well understood, changing this would work against the stated aim of continuity and provide no significant benefits. We would therefore want to see the current procedures maintained for FP7.

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