

Contribution to the CREST debate of 17 July 2009

ERA instruments: Towards a structured portfolio

This statement was drafted by the Steering Committee of EUROHORCs and circulated to all Member Organisations. However, it has not yet been formally approved by the General Assembly and should therefore be considered a working document.

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Introduction

As the organisation of the European Research funding and performing organisations, EUROHORCs welcomes the timely debate launched by the incoming Swedish Presidency of the EU on the issue of the portfolio of instruments that is currently in place to realise the European Research Area (ERA). A number of initiatives, organisations and programmes were launched over time to overcome fragmentation, create synergies between national systems and ultimately improve the conditions for doing research in Europe – which needs to remain the central aim of the ERA concept.

These instruments (be they of administrative, institutional or programmatic nature) were created by different stakeholders and different levels of governance with different target publics and aims in mind. It is crucial, now that the ERA is becoming a reality and that initiatives on ERA's "behalf" are multiplying, that a critical look is taken at the overall picture and goals that should be reached.

Concurring with the view of a number of other actors, EUROHORCs believes that the European Research Area should clearly aim at improving conditions for doing research in Europe (e.g. infrastructures, legal frameworks, funding levels) but also at simplifying and facilitating collaboration between researchers in Europe (e.g. dedicated funding programmes, creation of a Grant Union, opportunities for mobility). A wide number of actors are involved in the implementation of the ERA and all have a specific role to play (see below).

Overall, EUROHORCs believes that the realisation of the ERA requires the following conditions:

- ERA needs clear governance¹ and repartition of work between its main actors (e.g. national vs. European and political vs. research organisations) based on the principle of subsidiarity;
- ERA needs both common standards and best practices (e.g. peer review) as well as diversity to account for the differences between national research systems;
- ERA needs to differentiate between "funding" and "enabling" instruments and actors;
- ERA needs an optimal balance between competition and collaboration and the dedication to excellence;
- ERA needs stability both in terms of the actors involved as well as their activities and funding levels.

In the realisation of the ERA, EUROHORCs, based on its unique experience of funding and performing research in all fields throughout Europe sees itself with the following role: 1) relay the needs of the research community towards political actors, 2) amongst its member organisations transform into reality the concept of a European Grant Union, which would enable researchers to be more mobile and flexible in their transnational collaborations whilst remaining funded by national organisations and 3) join forces to work together on issues such as open access and 4) serve as a forum for permanent exchange of best practices in terms of funding and performing research.

In view of the above, EUROHORCs has recently launched a number of initiatives:

¹ EUROHORCs is convinced that the discussion of ERA instruments is connected to the question of the ERA governance. This paper focuses on the analysis of the ERA instruments; however, EUROHORCs thinks that it is crucial to lead a debate on the ERA governance as well.

- a) Together with the European Science Foundation (ESF) preparation and implementation of a Road Map for a Globally Competitive ERA of Excellence: this document outlines the actions to be undertaken at the level of ESF and EUROHORCs Member Organisations in view of creating the ERA. A final version of this document was adopted by ESF and EUROHORCs in April 2009.
- b) High level meeting and workshop with Research Ministers to increase the level of awareness of ERA-related initiatives from EUROHORCs Members and increase synergies in actions to make the ERA a reality. Follow-up actions include a survey on existing cross-border collaborations within Europe, proposals for actions to lift impediments for such collaborations and the organisation of a follow-up workshop in January 2010 to discuss further activities.
- c) Pilot Grant Union initiatives such as the Money Follows Researcher, Money follows Cooperation Line and Lead Agency Procedure were launched under the umbrella of D-A-CH (German, Austrian and Swiss Research Organisations). These are gradually being expanded to other countries and organisations.
- d) Position papers and statements on topics such as Joint Programming, the EU Animals Directive or the ERC Mid-term review.

(1) Creating the ERA: Who and How

Before analysing the ERA instruments, their gaps and overlaps, a differentiation should be made between a number of actors that make the ERA “live”. Their anchorage, missions and goals vary but have unique contributions to make in the context of the ERA. However, one should ponder over their relative weight and complementarity.

To further develop the ERA, the following types of actors all have a role to play:

- National Research Performing Organisations (RPOs): by stepping up their collaborations, they should help their researchers benefit from the increased mobility and cooperation possibilities. They are crucial in ensuring the attractiveness of the European science landscape.
- National Research Funding Organisations (RFO): they should strive towards achieving the highest standards of peer review and science management in order to be able to mutually recognise their procedures and standards. This in turns allows them to open up their funding schemes and collaborate in view of the creation of a European Grant Union. The benefits of collaborations initiated at this level and implemented through national systems are manifold. The main ones include the “bottom-up approach” to scientific collaborations, a guarantee of quality through the “mainstreaming” into national schemes.
- National legislators: their key role is to put into place the necessary framework conditions for RPOs and RFOs to perform their missions and ensure stable and sound funding of their national higher education and research systems. It is also crucial that they support the

undertakings of RPOs and RFOs in view of the ERA and, in particular, of the creation of a Grant Union. Together with supranational legislators (see below) they have to enable the mobility of researchers by creating transnational health insurances and pension funds as well as more flexible work permissions for scientists from outside Europe.

- International and interagency organisations (ESF, COST, EUROHORCs, EMBO, ...): these organisations are very varied. Their roles currently vary between interest representation/policy framing, exchange of best practices and launch of initiatives to open up national systems, to the funding of collaborative research programmes, funding of networking activities for researchers and research performance. At this level, there is thus a complex mix of organisations. These often have very different backgrounds, histories and aims. Some of them are thematically focused, others work in a thematically open way. Their funding and relation to national actors vary (some organisations are dependent on Ministries, others on RFOs). EUROHORCs clearly identifies this level of organisations as one which should be analysed in depth and possibly reviewed. Per se, the aim should not be to reduce the number of actors at this level. However, it is crucial that they all have a clear role, mission and target public and complementary rather than overlapping activities.
- Supranational funding organisations (EC level): their role is to ensure funding of cross-border research programmes and projects and to launch initiatives to promote the mobility of researchers. Through their size, they also have the unique capacity to support the whole ERA by establishing new large research infrastructures or launching and funding initiatives that create the opportunity for Europe-wide competition of scientists (eg. ERC).
- Supranational legislators (EC, EP, Council of Ministers): similarly to national legislators, their role is to ensure framework conditions and funding at supranational level as well as to facilitate the mobility of researchers between European and non-European countries. Additionally to these actors, the last few years have seen the establishment of a maze of “in between actors”. These - like EIT, JTIs, Art. 169s - are establishing themselves as legal entities. Whilst they tend to manage rather specific initiatives (often targeted at a well defined community or topic), their multiplication as well as the variety of their legal status and funding rules largely contributes to the complexity of the ERA in its current state. This in turn not only makes the ERA less approachable and “customer-friendly” but also raises the risk of not being attractive to Europe’s best researchers.

In view of the importance of subsidiarity in order to ensure the basic conditions for a competitive scientific system, the national - and in many countries also the regional level - is central to the realisation of the ERA. Additionally, the separation of work at the national level between policy makers and science organisations should serve as a model for the functioning of the supranational (EU) level of policy and funding. At the national level, the science organisations, in the name of self-management of science, are entrusted with the freedom to perform their mission within clear framework conditions. Finally, looking at the efficiency of the overall ERA portfolio of instruments (defined as measures, instruments and organisations active in the context of the ERA), it should be ensured that there are as little redundancies and unclarities as possible as far as the mission of the actors involved is concerned.

(2) An Analysis of Current “Funding” Instruments

Current funding instruments or initiatives can be differentiated according to their goals. The table below is not exhaustive but aims at highlighting the main instruments at the disposal of the research community:

Funding research projects	
FP7	Main specificity: funding of small and large collaborative projects, participation of academia, SMEs and industry; funding through ERC of frontier research projects (no collaboration required); Complex and large programme with complex financial and legal requirements but benefits of size and visibility
RFOs	Main specificity: pilot actions to jointly fund small collaborative projects within the frame of national research projects, low bureaucracy but establishment still in its infancy
Launching programmes to fund research projects	
EUROCORES	Programmes launched by ESF establishing medium-size collaborative projects (academia)
JTIs	Public-Private Partnerships implementing the research agenda of a specific industry sector, generally by launching calls for collaborative projects including both industry and academia; high diversity of rules and financial conditions for participation
ERA-NET (+)	Coordination of programmes by national or regional actors to launch jointly funded calls and medium-sized collaborative projects (mainly academia, some industry participation)
169	Joint research programmes in specific fields co-funded by national actors and the EC
Joint Programming	Still to be defined
Supporting networks and integration	
ESF, COST	Similarity between Research Networking Programmes and COST activities for small-medium sized networks
FP7	Networks of Excellence (currently under discussion but used differently by different parts of FP7)
FP7	Integrated Activity for Research Infrastructures
EIT	Integration of large research, education and innovation consortia on broad research topics
Supporting Individual Researchers	
FP 7	Marie Curie: career-building and mobility of individual researchers at different stages of their career, ERC (starting grants, advanced grants)

(3) Challenges of the Current European Funding Instruments and Measures to Tackle Them

(A) Challenges

EUROHORCs would like to draw the attention to a number of inefficiencies which needs to be tackled in order to make the existing funding instruments more effective.

Overlaps and Complexity

Currently not all instruments have unique profiles; between some of the schemes considerable overlaps exist. Some programmes focus on similar topics and target groups or have similar structures and aims. For example, ERA-NETs, which are launched by the European Commission and EUROCORES, which are organised by the European Science Foundation, both aim at creating medium-scaled European research programmes. In both cases, the broader topic is defined and research consortia are invited to hand in proposals for projects in more specific areas within this topic. In addition, although its mode of operation is not yet clearly visible, the new instrument of Joint Programming aims at the same direction. Also, COST and the ESF Research Networking Programmes have similar aims; both encourage nationally funded research groups to meet and share their knowledge and fund these networking activities. EUROHORCs is convinced that these overlaps make the European research funding landscape more complex and inscrutable than necessary.

Additionally, the creation of the ERC adds a new dimension to the national research funding systems. The potential political, financial and administrative challenges of hosting a larger number of ERC grantees should not be underestimated.

Gaps in Research Funding Instruments

EUROHORCs, in line with many researchers and research coordinators, identified several gaps in the research programmes that are currently offered by the organisations in the ERA.

First of all, it is felt that there is a tendency towards larger projects and consortia, making it impossible for smaller project teams to compete. Also, often the bureaucracy, especially in programmes launched by the EC is overboarding and prevents smaller teams from submitting proposals. In some fields, such as the humanities and social sciences, extremely large projects do not necessarily correspond to their culture and needs. Therefore, whole disciplines often feel excluded from cross-border programmes launched by the European Commission.

EUROHORCs is also convinced that European programmes need to take more measures in order to draw talented researchers and retain them in Europe. The development of a large pool of talented young researchers is crucial in the development of a successful ERA. Currently, Europe seems to lag behind when it comes to developing ideas about the recruitment of young investigators. However, it should be clear that national players should make their researchers and research communities fit for international competition and encourage their mobility. Subsidiarity is crucial when it comes to this issue.

Additionally, EUROHORCs thinks that European programmes should encourage co-operation with researchers in third countries in order to ensure the best possible partners for European researchers. In order for European researchers to be able to incorporate researchers working in third countries into their research projects and networks, a number of structural and legal hurdles need to be lifted.

Finally, the responsibility for research infrastructures remains too diffuse within ERA. Although ESFRI has produced an impressive list of infrastructure that would be needed, the mechanisms to decide on concrete projects and to fund them are not in place. In this issue, supranational organisations should take the lead to contribute significantly to the funding of infrastructure that is crucial for the further development and attractiveness of the ERA.

(B) Measures to Tackle these Challenges:

EUROHORCs proposes concrete measures that help making the ERA reality.

Reduction of Overlaps and Simplification of Research Landscape

EUROHORCs thinks that there is no need for several programmes that have similar aims and which contribute to an increasing complexity of funding programmes that make it even more difficult for researchers to keep an overview of all of them. Therefore, organisations should evaluate their instruments and ask themselves critically if all serve a unique purpose. Generally, the number of instruments should be as small as feasible and the rules governing them as simple as possible. When similar programmes exist, organisations should not hesitate to stop their instruments even if they are successful. For instance, EUROHORCs cancelled its EURYI award as soon as the European Research Council started advertising its ERC starting grants which had a similar purpose.

With regards to the complexity of financial rules that make the participation in the largest EU-level programme (FP7) less attractive, the opportunity of the review of the EC's Financial Regulation should be used to ensure that a specific set of rules could be developed that suit the needs and culture of the research community and organisations. Such practical details can be just as important as the clear definition of instruments for the attractiveness of the ERA.

Appropriate Rules at National Level

EUROHORCs is convinced that a prerequisite of the Grant Union is to change national rules in order to support an increasing flexibility and openness of research systems. At the moment there are structural and legal hurdles which prevent national research organisations from transferring money abroad or accepting the evaluation results of other organisations. On the other hand, in some countries schemes like "Money follows Researcher" (researchers are allowed to take their grants, or parts of them, to another country in order to be able to finish their projects) or "Lead Agency" (only one organisation evaluates proposals of international projects and other organisations recognise the results and fund the part of research that is being performed in their countries) already allow researchers to take with them their grants or apply to only one organisation even

though more organisations are involved. These agreements should be extended to more countries and could so ensure an efficient way of collaboration. If national systems are flexible enough to handle international research groups there will be no need to create new funding instruments. In the long term, this should help reducing complexity. Especially for smaller projects and disciplines that are not well-represented in larger EU-programmes, cross-border initiatives at national level might prove more useful (e.g. for social sciences and the humanities)

Europe-wide Frameworks

EUROHORCs sees a need to establish European frameworks in order to make bi- and multinational research easier. Depending on the issue, this can be done through the development of good practices and minimum standards that need to be applied all over Europe or through laws and regulations. For example, when common criteria and standards for peer review are established in all European countries, the transferral of grants would be accepted by these organisations. These standards have to refer to the number and quality of experts, the size and composition of review panels, the evaluation criteria and the duration of the evaluation process.

On the other hand, there are issues that need regulation on the European level to make sure that the framework conditions for researchers are similar in all European countries. Harmonisation of research training programmes (PhD) across Europe, common rules on Open Access to publicly funded research results or Intellectual Property Rights and a homogenous and transferable social security system for researchers are all examples of measures that will help the ERA become competitive. Also, the co-ordination of research infrastructures on the European level would help using existing and future resources more efficiently.

Connection of Research Performers

Research Performing Organisations, by linking their programmes in a variable geometry adapted to each issue in order to optimally exploit the complementarities they each developed within their national context, can streamline the European research effort both in goal-oriented and in blue-sky research. Coordinating their actions among them and networking with local research players (namely universities) throughout Europe will permit them to extend to the European level the crucial role they play in structuring research. Instruments should be developed to support the collaboration of RPOs, ranging from alliances to joint institutes, as well as to support the mobility of their researchers.

Conclusion

In view of the future of the European Research Area EUROHORCs would like to highlight several points: overall, EUROHORCs is convinced that the ERA can be further developed without creating new instruments and funding lines and therefore without adding unnecessary complexity. It is crucial to avoid any duplication of instruments and instead of adding new rules and programmes, organisations should rather work on the establishment of research(er)-friendly conditions. For example, reciprocal recognition of evaluation results and

other rules are a step in the right direction. When dealing with third countries, programmes like the Lead Agency scheme or Money follows Researcher scheme might be useful instruments.

A Grant Union can be established with the help of schemes that already exist; they can be extended and adapted where necessary. EUROHORCs is convinced that the ERA does not necessarily need fewer organisations or instruments. However, all players in the ERA need clear mandates as well as well-defined goals and target publics. Finally, the governance of the ERA should ensure that all actors in the ERA coordinate with each other.

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