Some New Perspectives on the European Research Area (ERA)

Euroscience's response to the European Commission's Green Paper

Euroscience, a grassroots organisation

1. Euroscience (ES) is a grassroots association of people active in European research from many perspectives – active researchers, research managers, science journalists, policy and decision makers. It was founded in Strasbourg in 1997 and now has a membership from over 40 countries representing the "wider" Europe. It has been an active partner of the European Commission and many other European and international bodies and has also been a key protagonist for many new initiatives in European research policy, including the ERC and the Charter for Researchers. In 2004, it established the biennial science event – the Euroscience Open Forum (ESOF) in Stockholm and this will be in its third edition in 2008 in Barcelona following Munich in 2006. In 2010, the festival moves to Torino. This is a very important initiative in bringing science to all European society and its citizens.

2. It should be emphasised that in this paper "science" and "research" encompasses all aspects of science in the wider meaning used in continental Europe and embraces all knowledge from the arts and humanities to medicine, physics and engineering.

A welcome to the Green Paper and the consultation, albeit with criticism

3. Euroscience welcomes the Green paper and the wide consultative process initiated by the European Commission. However, it is rather concerned at some aspects of the procedure as it notes that the Commission has established 6 experts groups as part of this process. It is unclear whether these groups will review and distill the inputs received as part of the consultation or whether this is an additional and "private" consultation. Thus, while not denying the European Commission the need to take advice, it gives an impression of an "insider club" which is unfortunate. Perhaps such groups should have been established in advance in order to advise on the formulation of the Green Paper before its publication. Euroscience, as a community-based organisation believes very much in the bottom-up process and hopes that the Commission will follow this route.

ERA needs more vision, less implementation details

4. Euroscience warmly welcomed the ERA concept established in Lisbon in 2000 at the instigation of the then Research Commissioner, Philippe Busquin. Since then progress has been slow and Euroscience is concerned that the Lisbon/Barcelona objectives are nowhere near being achieved – indeed, in many parts of Europe we appear to have gone backwards.

5. Euroscience believes that, to take the ERA forward, the European Commission should have been more visionary and less concerned with the detailed issues of implementation. The ERA embraces all players and should not be just confined to the European Union and the European Commission. This is especially important for the wider Europe which needs to have a vision that really is inclusive and can offer leadership.

Europe must build on knowledge and reach out to a changing world

6. The World is changing very rapidly. We are faced with the rise of new Asian manufacturing economies with aspirations to become knowledge generating economies. The capital balances now at their disposal pose many challenges to the established G7 economies and will enable them financially to move into knowledge generation, even to the extent of paying for leading institutions in North America and Europe to establish themselves within these Asian economies.

7. This demonstrates the need for Europe to establish a real knowledge-led economy of global societal relevance. Even the USA is feeling the competition of the Asian challenge but still retains its substantial lead, based on a high recent level of research investment and much better organisational and financial mechanisms. Faced with the need to catch up with the USA and fend off the increasingly strong Asian challenge requires Europe to pool its resources and act together in order to compete effectively.

Urgent societal needs

8. We have also to address societal needs such as demography and world population growth, environment and climate challenges, energy, health and many more. Addressing these and raising the awareness and skill levels of Europe's population requires a coupling of research with education, especially science education at all levels. It requires a sound base in school systems as well as strengthening Europe's secondary and tertiary education systems. It would be sad if we will see a European Research Area next to a European Higher Education Area, a European Secondary Education Area, a European Innovation Area and so on. The Commission should come forward with a more unifying concept. This is urgently needed in order to achieve a European Knowledge Area and should be the key vision for the future.

ERA should state and address Europe's aim for leadership

9. ERA should state and address squarely Europe's aim for leadership; we should not be ashamed of this ambition. At the same time, our approach should not be inward looking. We must be open and this is the best way of attracting the best brains as the Americans have found in the past. However, aiming for leadership is only credible when the Member States and the Commission are prepared to

address institutional and financial weaknesses which have to do with the current inadequate distribution of responsibilities for science, technology and innovation in Europe. If not, one should forget about ERA as it would be repeating earlier mistakes when the 'Lisbon' goal, already greeted with considerable scepticism at the outset by European leaders, has been quickly buried because these leaders did not live up to the challenges to which they had committed themselves.

ERA must focus on key issues, including those where the Member States block progress

10. Euroscience advocates, therefore, an approach bringing together all the actors and working at a number of levels – regional, national, European and international – to agree on a limited number of crucial steps and commit to implement them, irrespective of difficult institutional and financial challenges. The main weakness of the Green Paper on ERA is that, though some of the crucial issues are mentioned, they are swamped in a flood of other less important issues, and are certainly not addressed by proposing or even considering adequate solutions. This will only be possible if the issues are set within an overall political vision which, by necessity, will concentrate and focus the debate.

11. Maybe it was inevitable that the Green Paper should be lacking in this respect. So far, the main impediment to progress in implementing the ERA has been the Member States themselves, who jealously and anachronistically guard their positions not realising that the strength of Europe comes from working together and using our diversity rather than creating monolithic approaches. After all, the European Union consists of an educated population of 450 million and has a long tradition of research and enquiry. We need to bring together the different emphases of the whole of Europe for maximum effect. We should not, however, spread our efforts thinly. Differentiation does not mean that all universities, all research institutes, all countries and all regions must have the same ambitions and only differ in the way they want to achieve them. Europe's ambitions are not within reach if all want to be at a par with the top US league. To recognise this requires political courage of the Members States, but also from the Commission.

Transfer part of national budgets to European level

12. Euroscience has fought hard for the European Research Council (ERC) and this will have a major impact at both the European and the national research funding structures. We want to see ERC develop and grow so that ultimately there will be a transfer of resources from the national to the European level with a changing role of the national and regional structures. It is the best way to assist a European top league in research and education.

JTIs, ERC and Research Infrastructures pillars of the Framework Programme

13. At the same time, ERA needs to address all constituencies and we see the new Joint Technology Initiatives (JTIs) as a welcome new approach in the Seventh

Framework Programme for tackling societal challenges with targeted research. It is of similar significance for industrial research as the ERC will have for more academic endeavours.

14. Together ERC and JTIs form the twin pillars for the Framework Programme as the means to promote and develop the ERA. The third pillar has to be that of research infrastructures with all of these activities coupled and paralleled with mobility programmes. Within the structures of the European Union (we repeat that ERA should be about Europe as a whole) a concentration on these aims is needed without the distraction of politically driven new initiatives such as the EIT (European Institute of Technology). Such a new idea neither address the challenge (in this case the promotion of innovation) nor the problem of fragmentation. Rather than offer a means of de-fragmentation, such ideas pull in the opposite direction. In this particular example, the problem is one that is best addressed by fiscal measures and incentives in the European venture capital market and European companies. In other words, political actions should strengthen and not undermine the European research endeavour.

Better and more research infrastructures require central funding

15. Research infrastructures are vital for Europe, and with the European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI) Road Maps, for the first time, some consensus exists on a list of near term priority investments. But without significant amounts of central funding at the European level, the list will just be the basis for a range of protracted, diffuse and largely unsuccessful negotiations between individual countries. Using part of the annual European Union budget surplus has been suggested as one way of identifying new money, but there are other many other options to be considered. At the same time, the ESFRI exercise, based on the Member States' institutions, has to be complemented by a real bottom up approach within the scientific community.

Status of Europe's researchers -Mobility requires clear targets for portable social security and pensions schemes

16. The overall status of researchers in society needs to be addressed in order to ensure that our best young brains are attracted to careers in research. This requires having clear career paths, the mentoring of young researchers and their adequate remuneration.

17. Mobility programmes as part of the Framework Programme are important. But here again the crucial step that must be taken is for the Member States to undertake. They must commit to align and harmonise and make sufficiently transferable arrangements for social security and pensions for scientists and engineers of all generations to actually become mobile. Only then can we truly achieve an internal market for research and researchers. Without these measures

Europe will not harvest the full potential of important steps such as the Bologna Process and the European Charter for Researchers.

More funding for R&D is needed

18. Euroscience welcomed the European Commission's original proposal for a much financially increased Framework Programme but was dismayed with the level of the final settlement which showed that Member States did not take the Lisbon objectives seriously enough. The first action needed to make the ERA a reality must be to restore the original budget at the time of the review of the Union's Financial Perspectives. Therefore, in order to overcome the cynicism within the European research community, Euroscience believes that the leaders of the EU Member States must indeed show leadership and commitment by restoring the Framework Programme budget and then matching this by parallel increased investment at home. Without more funding, neither the ERC nor a rich landscape of European research infrastructures will be able to develop and so will reduce the attractiveness of the ERA.

19. The message is clear – research and ERA will only succeed if the groundwork of fiscal policies and investment are in place and coupled with an active de-fragmentation approach. There has to be an involvement of all the actors, both individually and collectively in non-bureaucratic funding structures, taking best practice from wherever it occurs in Europe for the benefit of all. In this way Euroscience believes that we can release the huge intellectual potential of the European Union and the wider Europe and play a major research leadership role in our World.

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