Widespread dissatisfaction with European Union research funding

At the beginning of February the Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG) based in Vienna launched a declaration entitled "Trust Researchers: a declaration for the attention of the European Council of Ministers and the European Parliament [Assembly]", and invited researchers to add their signatures as a display of support. The text of the declaration reads: "Funding of research in Europe should be based on mutual trust and responsible partnering; research should be funded according to the nature of research, meaning concentrated on output; the European Research Area (ERA) should benefit from a consistent vision shared by all actors for funding research throughout the different programmes, avoiding all kinds of unnecessary technical and administrative details but instead promoting key funding principles based on an appropriate level of accountability; research and development is of the utmost importance for Europe and its development but we need effective, reliable and stable funding principles to make it happen; recognition that research and innovation are risk-taking activities, hence an appropriate level of tolerable risks is vital for success and should be supported by European research programmes. In sum, we ask the European Council of Ministers and Parliament to urgently simplify the financial and administrative provisions related to the Framework Programme and other European funding instruments considering their important leverage effect for the competitiveness of the European Research Area." These are clearly highly laudable sentiments, from which it would be bizarre to divagate, and indeed the declaration has already attracted thousands of signatures and hundreds of comments.

The analysis of these comments in itself reveals some fascinating insights into the mentality of the present community of scientific researchers in Europe—at least that section of it that has deemed it appropriate to append a signature (it was an unfortunate—from the viewpoint of attracting the greatest variety of opinion—oversight of the initiators of this action not to have offered the opportunity to oppose the declaration and comment, or simply to comment without signing). Many simply affirm that the effort and time spent on complying with the administrative requirements is of the same order as that spent on doing the research and development itself. Others are perhaps a little naïve—for example, calls to make basic research the priority (was never the avowed intention of the Framework programmes), or to give grants to individuals rather than consortia (why then involve the European Union?). A more subtle fallacy is represented by "One shouldn't expect SMEs [small and medium-sized enterprises] to take large financial risks for doing research that is beneficial to all."[1] This comment evokes that great bugbear of research funding, namely that the beneficiaries are rarely those who put up the money for it. No ingenious (i.e., in the sense of promulgating some intricate administrative arrangement) solution to this problem has ever been found; probably the only way is to create a permanent corps of publicly funded researchers who freely make their results available to the public, in the style of the French CNRS or the Academy institutes as they used to exist in the Soviet Union. For some reason this model is not currently in favour. One of the most incisive critiques, not only of the European Union (EU) research programmes but also of the national ones is "Research programmes should not be considered as contracts as due to the nature of scientific research any predictable milestones are unlikely to be very interesting. It is the unpredictable observations that lead to progress."[2]

Despite the plethora of comments, a crucial point, also missing in the Declaration, is that in the particular case of the scientific research and technical development programmes of the EU, reducing bureaucracy could actually have a deleterious effect. The reason is that perhaps the greatest weakness of the programme is the miserably small ratio of available funds to requested funds. In fact, even the ratio of available funds to the cost of approved projects is significantly less than one. This has the very damaging consequence that not all eligible projects (i.e., those passing all the threshold criteria for fundability, which are already very stringent) can be funded. Therefore, the most urgent need is to ensure that all eligible projects are funded. Either the budget has to be increased or the number of applications has to be reduced. Another possibility would be to further raise the eligibility threshold, but it is already so high that even projects judged to be mostly "very good" are typically not eligible, so that does not really seem to be practicable. Assuming that the budget cannot be increased (although an increase would actually be fully the spirit of the Lisbon Strategy), the number of

[1] Posted 24 February at 11:37 by Daniel Harris (Kendra Foundation, UK).
[2] Posted 19 March at 09:56 by Stephen West (London Research Institute, Cancer Research UK).

Journal of Biological Physics and Chemistry **10** (2010) 3–4
Received 31 March 2010
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applications must be considerably reduced—and a highly effective instrument for that is the existence of the very heavy bureaucratic burden associated with funded projects. The deterrent aspect of the present bureaucratic regimen is well reflected in a number of comments, such as "The procedure for applying for EU grants is now a huge barrier, and it is putting Europe in an uncompetitive situation in comparison with the rest of the world;[3] "The complexity of the application process is a strong deterrent";[4] "I no longer consider any of these funding schemes viable for attracting top candidates in my field";[5] and "The rewards of gaining EU funding for scientific research are tempered by the administrative burden placed on grant holders".[2] The remark on competitivity recalls one of the conclusions of the House of Lords Select Committee on the European Communities, that the Framework programme actually diminished European industrial competitiveness.[6] If, more than 15 years later, the same criticisms are still being made, what inference is reasonable regarding the timescale of possible reform? The remark on attracting top candidates raises the possibility that the deterrent may be selective and lower the quality of applications. This is a rather complex issue, also involving consideration of the balance between industrial and university research, but it should anyway be kept in mind that the general opinion of the European science community is that EU-funded projects are "at best" mediocre, hence one does not actually expect involvement from "top candidates".

In summary, then, were this Declaration to be successful in reducing the bureaucracy associated with the research and development projects, presumably it would become more attractive to propose them, and therefore an even smaller fraction of applications would be funded. It would be hard to overemphasize the damaging effects of eligible but unfunded projects. Typically a consortium that has been laboriously assembled in order to submit a project becomes so discouraged that it is dispersed and all the effort is wasted. This has a very demoralizing effect. Therefore, reduction of bureaucracy needs at least one accompanying measure. This could be either an appropriate increase in the budget, but a more cost-effective alternative would be to provide financial support for proposal preparation. A good proposal should thoroughly review the state-of-the-art and provide strong evidence for the selected course of action (including an analysis of economic impact in the case of a technical development project). If this work were to be properly funded, not only would the quality of proposals increase, but the justification of any feeling of disappointment if the proposal were finally not funded would vanish. The core of the proposal (i.e., not the administrative details) would become publicly available after the decision on whether to fund had been taken.

Any possible optimism that the formula (reduction of bureaucracy + accompanying measure) could achieve a change in the procedures must, however, be tempered by knowledge of Parkinson's Law,[7] according to which bureaucracy must inevitably increase. This, unfortunately, makes it very unlikely that any proposal for reform, no matter how wise and reasonable, will be successful.

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[3] Posted 18 February at 13:20 by Peter Dobson (Oxford University).
[4] Posted 18 February at 14:05 by David Carter (University of Cambridge).
[5] Posted 18 February at 23:33 by Christopher Hays (Oxford University).
[6] 12th Report, *Financial Control and Fraud in the Community*. London: HMSO (1994).
[7] C.N. Parkinson, *Parkinson's Law*. Harmondsworth (Middlesex): Penguin (1965).



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2010-04-30T00:00:00Z
Association of Modern Scientific Investigation
http://dspace.lib.cranfield.ac.uk/handle/1826/4793
Ramsden, Jeremy J., Widespread dissatisfaction with European Union research funding, Journal of Biological Physics and Chemistry, Volume 10 Issue 1, 2010, Pages 3-4.

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