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**European Parliament workshop
on barriers to participation
in European research programmes**

Briefing Note

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European Parliament workshop on barriers to participation in European research programmes

1 INTRODUCTION

The European Parliament is a co-legislator in European research programmes and has responsibility for budgets and budgetary control. It will have the responsibility of working with the Commission on the development of the next framework programme, FP7, so that the programme achieves its aims.

Parliament is aware that concerns have been expressed that the formal procedures involved in European Framework programmes create a barrier to the participation of smaller actors, including smaller states and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). In order to inform its approach to the 7th Framework programme, the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy has commissioned a briefing on levels of bureaucracy in EU research programmes and on ways of improving access by actors of all scales. A workshop will be organised and held by EP DG Internal Policies, Policy Department A and EASAC for the Committee at the European Parliament in Brussels on the morning of 22 February 2006.

It is the purpose of this note to provide briefing to Parliamentarians as a background to the workshop.

2 AIMS OF EUROPEAN RESEARCH

Research and Technological Development (RTD) is recognised an essential function of modern society. It is a major factor in international competitiveness and in providing welfare and prosperity for citizens.

At the 2000 Lisbon Council the European Union set itself the aim of becoming the world's most competitive economy. In recognition of the role that RTD will play in achieving this objective, the Union set itself the 'Barcelona target' of spending 3% of GDP on RTD by 2010.

In order to implement these aims, the Union has developed a strategic approach to RTD. It is recognised that the principle of subsidiarity applies to research and that member states will, through their own national research programmes, make a major contribution to the Unions aims. There are, however, areas of research where joint action by partners spanning national boundaries is required and for these the Union has developed a system of framework programmes. The European Framework Programmes have provided funding for a large number of international projects and have achieved a high rate of participation. Calls for proposals have routinely been over-subscribed.

However, the overall picture is that spending on research in Europe has stagnated over recent years. The Union recognised that greater efforts in co-operation are needed and agreed to the establishment of a European Research Area (ERA). The sixth framework programme (FP6) is the main instrument for implementing the ERA.

Within the Programme there are many different actions and these are summarised in the table below, again taken from the Commission's introductory brochure:

3 The Sixth Framework Programme - Schematic overview of specific programmes, thematic and horizontal priorities and instruments

	Specific Programme Integrating and Strengthening the ERA											Specific Programme Structuring the ERA		
	Life sciences, genomics and Biotechnology for health	Information Society Technologies	Nano-technologies and nano-sciences, information-based multifunctional materials, new production processes and devices	Aeronautics and Space	Food Quality and Safety	Sustainable Development, Global Change and Eco-systems	Citizens and Governance in a knowledge-based society	RTD supporting policies and anticipating scientific and technological needs	Horizontal research activities involving SMEs	Specific measures in support of international cooperation	Strengthening the foundations of the ERA	Research and Innovation	Human Resources and Mobility	Research Infrastructures
Network of Excellence	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*						
Integrated Project	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*						
Programmes implemented jointly by several Member States	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Specific Targeted Research Project	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*				*
Specific Targeted Innovation Project											*			
Specific research projects for SMEs								*						
Integrated Infrastructure Initiative													*	
Marie Curie Mobility Actions									*	*	*	*	*	*
Coordination Action	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Specific Support Action	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

Table 7 : Schematic overview on FP6 activities and instruments (only EC Framework Programme, for the Euratom Framework Programme on nuclear research a similar brochure is available)

One of the aims of FP6 has been promote integration, including vertically, engaging the full range of stakeholders in a project, horizontally, engaging with actors across themes and sectorally, engaging actors from different private and publicly funded research groups, including SMEs.

FP6 introduced two new instruments designed to strengthen the coherence and general effectiveness of co-operation in science in Europe. The Integrated Projects instrument was to support objective-driven research (research which aims to deliver knowledge for the development of products, services or processes). Networks of Excellence are intended to strengthen communities of knowledge and expertise on specific topics where it is essential to build critical mass at a European level. The NoEs are research type projects each with a specific programme of activities jointly agreed, but with no specific research output.

4 EVIDENCE OF PERFORMANCE OF FRAMEWORK PROGRAMMES IN ENGAGING SMES AND GROUPS FROM NEW MEMBER STATES (NMSS)

Given the aims of strengthening the European Research Area, encouraging international collaboration and, in particular, the participation of SMEs it was clearly important to ensure that this was happening in practice. A high level expert panel, chaired by Professor Ramon Marimon, was commissioned to evaluate the effectiveness of the new instruments in FP6.

The panel reported in June 2004. It concluded that FP6 had been effective in fostering trans-national collaborative research, but the panel identified a number of weaknesses. In particular, it concluded that the participation of SMEs in the new instruments was unsatisfactory.

They singled out the Networks of Excellence as an area that was particularly devoid of SME participation because SMEs found it “almost impossible to become involved” in them.

The panel also concluded that the participation of research groups from NMSs was “growing too slowly”. The panel considered the reasons for these disappointing findings.

They list a number of factors but the most immediately relevant for the workshop are as follows:

- The costs and risks of participation, the Panel concluded, seemed unreasonably high and this had deterred partners from industry, in particular SMEs and especially groups in NMSs from participating. The “one step” application process had increased risks and costs and the panel recommended the implementation of a “two step process”
- There was a perception that bureaucracy had increased. The panel noted this as a matter of very high concern
- There was also criticism of the evaluation mechanisms, which were considered unhelpful and confusing by many of the parties consulted by the Panel.
- Protracted negotiations (up to a year to award of contract) and cuts in funding during the process were also cited by many consultees as a cause of low participation.

The Marimon panel, however, noted that some of the older instruments in European Framework Programmes continued to be subject to good levels of participation by SMEs and NMSs, in particular the STREPS (Specific Targeted Research Projects) and CRAFT (Co-operative Research Action for Technology, aimed at SMEs) programmes seemed to be attractive to SMEs and certainly preferable to the new instruments.

The panel, however, also considered that stability was an important factor in encouraging participation and recommended that the instruments and actions were not altered again for the next framework programme.

The Marimon report is the most recent source of evidence on participation and an important background document for the workshop. It contains analysis of participation rates and a full assessment of the consultations made by the Panel.

Without going over the same ground again, it is the purpose of the workshop to consider the current state of affairs and, in the light of experience with FP6, to suggest how administrative barriers to participation can be lowered.

5 THE WORKSHOP

EASAC has been asked by the Industry, Research and Energy Committee of the European Parliament to identify speakers for this workshop who have experience of, and have participated in, FP projects and can discuss the level of bureaucracy in the 6th FP and the remedies that they would suggest. There are three speakers, one each representing the research organisation sector, the industry sector and the university/SME sector.

The proceedings of the workshop, including the presentations and the debate afterwards, will be compiled by EASAC and edited by EP.

5.1 Points that will be made at the Workshop

Speakers at the workshop will make a number of points from their own experience with European Research Programmes. Some of these will reinforce the points made in the Marimon report and conclusions may be broadly similar. However, the workshop is taking place nearly two years after the Marimon panel presented its findings and Parliamentarians may care to reflect on the degree to which the Marimon Panel's conclusions and recommendations remain valid and the steps that have been made to implement them in plans for FP7.

Some of the points that will be made are set out below.

5.1.1 Reducing Risks and Costs of Participation

It seems that the perception remains strongly that risks and costs of participation are high. SMEs and groups from NMSs are considered likely to find these unacceptable and this will reduce their willingness to participate.

Specific arrangements for small consortia might help those with limited investment for applications.

The application process itself should be made in stages to ensure that unsuitable applications are filtered out without incurring high costs for applicants.

The first stage should be made simple, but the requirements should be clearly stated

5.1.2 Clarifying Application Procedures

The point will be made that the application process is unnecessarily complex. It is recognised that the FPs are complex instruments and that considerable care must be taken to ensure that the process is fair, transparent and not open to corruption. However, it is noted that the simple process of gathering the different briefings, application forms and specifications is itself difficult and time consuming. This is considered by many to be unnecessary and workshop speakers are likely to propose an "application pack" to a standard format for all applicants.

There may also be a case for improving procedures for electronic application.

Workshop speakers will also comment on the level of practical support for applicants, saying that it is inadequate and take the opportunity to press the case for higher levels of support, particularly in the first stage of a multi-stage process.

It will be noted that particular care needs to be made to ensure that SMEs and groups in NMSs are sufficiently briefed and have access to all the information they need. It is important that the form of the briefing and information matches the business practices of these potential participants.

5.1.3 Contract Negotiations

Speakers will comment on this as the system of post-award negotiation is still considered unsatisfactory. Again, it is recognised that care has to be taken in the disbursement of public funds but speakers will question why it can take up to a year from the agreement of the award to the actual production of the funds, and it is also considered that there is much that can be done to reduce the time needed by simple administrative means.

The Commission's own approval procedures will also be quoted as a cause for excessive delay in awarding contracts.

5.1.4 Reporting

It is recognised that this may not be a major factor for some first time applicants, but there is a strong perception within the different communities that the Framework Programmes that the reporting requirements of FP projects are excessively onerous and costly for successful consortia.

In particular, some of the speakers may question the need for so many different forms of report. They may claim that the reporting procedure could be considerably simplified without loss of accountability. They will quote many example of duplication of information and inappropriate demands.

Again they may comment on the delay and error rate in the Commission's handling of reports.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The European Framework Programmes have been a major force for implementation of the EU's aims to improve collaboration in research and mobility of researchers.

If, however, the FPs are to play a major part in deliver the Lisbon Strategy, they must be as inclusive as possible. Currently SMEs and groups in NMSs feel a measure of exclusion. The new instruments introduced in FP6 to implement the ERA have apparently not improved inclusion of these groups.

Measures that can be taken to improve participation will be considered at the workshop, including:

- Reducing risks and costs of entry by adopting a multi stage process,
- Simplifying administrative process for application,
- Reducing delay in award of contract,
- Streamlining reporting procedures.

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