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Europe needs a single system for competitive research funding

By Merle Jacob

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The diversity of European research is at threat, and with it our ability to respond to the unexpected. Pooling resources would help, argues Merle Jacob.

The ultimate goal of science policy is to provide societies with a hedge against future uncertainty. To achieve this, investment in research should be guided by the need to ensure both critical mass and diversity.

Investment in critical mass can hedge against uncertainties that are already well known, such as the grand challenges identified as priorities in Horizon 2020. Diversity, on the other hand, can help to secure us against uncertainties that we cannot yet discern or that may arise from the actions we take.

To put it another way: diversity provides robustness. In all the lip service paid to excellence and innovation in national and EU science policy documents, the issue of robustness gets little attention. But it should, because the diversity on which it depends is under threat.

All over Europe, the diversity of national science systems is decreasing, as small and vulnerable subjects are killed off by efforts to improve efficiency and promote excellence. This is a more pressing problem than the national differences in the performance and governance of research that are such a focus of policies to create the European Research Area.

How, though, can countries that are hard pressed to fund the science that they know they definitely need also make room for areas of knowledge that are idiosyncratic, emerging or too abstract for their use to be assessed? (More tragically, there are aspects of use that are so integrated into our everyday lives that we no longer see the academic work embedded in them, such as the contributions of humanities research to contemporary art and literature.)

Public funding for basic science takes three forms: competitive allocations to researchers and groups; competitive allocations to organisations; and direct allocations to organisations, although usually even these are in part based on performance-related criteria. There are a variety of approaches, and countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK use all three funding routes, but there is a general tendency for member states to have a portion of their funding for basic science allocated through competition.

My proposal—offered with the intention of starting a debate, rather than as a worked-out policy—is that funding for basic science that is now allocated competitively be transferred from the national to the European level. Pooling our resources would allow us to optimise simultaneously on two fronts: excellence and diversity. We could support research areas that would otherwise not survive, achieve critical mass in at least some small and vulnerable subjects, and promote excellence by creating a European platform for these areas of research.

Europe as a whole could only benefit from having a larger share of its basic-science budget allocated in a way that provides greater competition than at the national level. There are also potential gains in terms of governance, as we would reduce the burden of administration at the national level.

Having a single platform for basic research in Europe would streamline administration and reduce the burden on referees by reducing the total number of grant proposals. Refereeing is a hidden and growing cost that is easily ignored as it is a common-pool resource—even more so given that the number of researchers who provide this service is much smaller than the number making use of it—and the increasing number of research councils in Europe pay only a fraction of its true value.

There are, I am sure, people who would not care for this suggestion. There is a tendency to believe that Brussels creates more problems and bureaucracy than it resolves, and there is some truth to this.

There is also the argument that this solution will hinder researchers from some nations more than others. Nations with relatively weak research systems will see their contribution to the common pot—money that could have been used to strengthen their own researchers—siphoned off by researchers in stronger nations.

There are two problems with this argument. The first is that we must at some point decide whether we want excellent science or nationally representative science. The second is that the gains in diversity to the system as a whole ought to balance any losses.

Clearly, leaving science to Brussels is not going to make Europe's problems in this area disappear. But Brussels can still provide at least a partial answer to some of Europe's science policy issues. I cannot help but think that in some ways, the talk about excellence and European science that surrounds the ERA is just that: talk. Why not

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