

Improving the coordination of national research programmes in Europe: an impact assessment framework for ERA-NETs

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Research subject and hypothesis

In Europe around 85 percent of civic public research funds is programmed, financed, monitored and evaluated at a national level. Less than 6 per cent of total R&D investment and only 15 per cent of European publicly financed civil R&D¹ is financed in a cross-border, collaborative manner (European Commission, 2008a). This fragmentation² of research funding in Europe has variously been put forward as a barrier to the attainment of the critical masses of research excellence, a potential source of duplication of effort and an inefficient use of administrative resources.³ It has, in fact, been widely interpreted as one of the main factors preventing Europe from achieving its full research potential.

In this context, the ERA-NET scheme was launched in 2002 as part of the Sixth Framework Programme (6FP) to improve coordination between Member States in terms of the design, implementation and evaluation of R&D programmes. It was conceived as a bottom-up approach to foster transnational collaboration in research in Europe involving Ministries and Research Agencies and Councils in "variable geometry" arrangements. This was the first time that research funding bodies in Europe were given an opportunity to network and engage in transnational cooperation with the support of European Commission (EC) funding. The main goal of this instrument was to contribute to restructuring the research landscape in Europe by improving coordination, reducing the level of fragmentation of the research funding system and encouraging the mutual opening of national and regional research programmes. The hope was that the establishment of long-term cooperation between national programmes would eventually lead to joint transnational programmes.

The ERA-NET scheme is one of the most significant instruments developed and implemented at EU level during the 6FP to transform the European Research Area (ERA) from a theoretical concept to a more practical policy approach (EC, 2009). There is still, however, little empirical evidence about the impacts of ERA-NETs at either a national or a European level.

Our current research involves the development of an analytical framework and a battery of indicators for assessing, in the medium and long term, the effects, benefits and impacts of the ERA-NET scheme. This framework will help to implement a data collection scheme that will facilitate this assessment over time.

We have identified a number of hypotheses concerning the impacts of the ERA-NETs at three levels: (a) policy level, (b) programme implementation level and (c) research performer level. The

1 Of which 10 percent is accounted for by intergovernmental organisations and schemes, and 5 percent by the Framework Programme.

2 The concept of fragmentation has been examined in a number of key policy documents. These include: the Communication from the EC (2000); the ERA Green Paper (EU, 2007); and the reports of the Experts Groups: "ERA Rationales" (EC, 2008b) and "Optimising research programmes and priorities" (EC, 2008c). The latter Expert Group concluded that the concept of fragmentation is composed of system failures at the level of governance to the extent that there is a lack of coordination or cooperation in research support, whereas at the level of execution of research it is better replaced by the notion of sub-criticality.

3 See EC (2008b).

analytical framework being developed is thus being designed to test hypotheses such as the following:

- Coordination reduces fragmentation of the European research funding system
- Coordination improves the likelihood of establishing critical masses of research effort
- Coordination reduces duplication in terms of both research execution and administrative effort
- Coordination reduces administrative overheads
- Coordination increases the likelihood that excellence levels will be enhanced via a broadening of the competitive base
- Coordination improves the prospects for further joint activities
- Coordination enhances the likelihood of national programmes opening-up to foreign based researchers
- Coordination improves the spread of best practices programme management

This aim of this paper is to present and discuss the adequacy of the analytical framework and associated indicators in terms of their usefulness to policymakers at national and European levels when designing and implementing more sustainable and efficient trans-national programme cooperation.

The research is being undertaken as part of the NETWATCH Project⁴. This four-year project began at the JRC-IPTS⁵ in January 2008. As well as providing an analytical framework to assess the impacts of ERA-NETs, it is also developing a web platform to monitor and map ERA-NET developments, facilitate mutual learning and support transnational collaboration agreements in Europe.

Methodology

The steps involved in the research project are as follows:

- The collection of basic data on the nature and scope of ERA-NET activities in the EU. This data collection will focus on those ERA-NETs funded under the 7FP and those FP6 ERA-NETs still running by the end of 2010. Data will be collected initially via an online questionnaire to ERA-NET coordinators in the period from September to December 2009 and updated on a regular basis
- The development and refinement of the analytical impact assessment framework, including the development of relevant indicators
- The collection and analysis of data on these indicators

⁴ For more information see http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/coordination/era_lp_en.html

⁵ Joint Research Centre – Institute for Prospective and Technological Studies. For more information see: <http://ipts.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>

Expected results

The paper will:

- Describe the first results concerning the nature and scope of ERA-NET activities in the EU, based on the analysis of a questionnaire circulated to ERA-NETs coordinators in late 2009
- Outline the analytical framework and indicators developed for the impact assessment of ERA-NETs, based on a logic model approach
- Discuss the adequacy of the framework and associated indicators

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