

The future of the European research area

Summary

- *Excellent research is crucial for individual member states of the European Union as vital support for their social, cultural and economic development, in providing a magnet for the best international talents and as a contribution that Europe should continue to make to global development.*
- *The nature of the research base varies greatly across member states of the Union, partly for historical reasons and partly in response to varying political, economic, social and cultural circumstances and priorities.*
- *The European Commission has produced a Green Paper¹ on the future of the European Research Area (ERA), which LERU believes could be a dynamic and creative enterprise, capable of re-invigorating European research as a catalyst for social and economic benefit within Europe, and as a powerful contribution to development of a more just and sustainable global community.*
- *However, the motivation for the ERA must be clear. It must be to strengthen European research and its impacts rather than merely being used in a political project to concentrate greater authority at a European level.*
- *LERU strongly supports some of the Green Paper's proposals, particularly those on researcher mobility, joint planning, procurement and management of expensive infrastructure and facilities, public engagement with science, and a common cost-effective patenting system.*
- *We are highly sceptical of some of the fundamental assumptions that underlie the Green Paper, which the Paper takes to be so self-evidently correct that they are not raised as questions in the Commission's Public Consultation, but which run as threads through the Commission's approach:*
 - *that the normative organisation of European research should be based on formalised European networks with countries and regions specialising in particular areas;*
 - *and that there should be centralised coordination and direction of research at European level.**LERU believes these prior assumptions to be misconceived.*
- **Networks** *should be a response to the joint visions and enthusiasms of active researchers for individual projects. They should be supported as such, and a network support programme should be part of the Framework Programme. They should not be legally-fixed, institutionalised structures, which will tend to be relatively costly, with the risk of ossifying and lacking in both dynamism and flexibility.*
- **The European Research Area** *should be based on well-articulated interactions between European-level, national and regional processes in a lively research ecology, in which the ERA is not just that research funded by the Commission, but the totality of European research irrespective of funding source. The European level should focus on stimulating a common market for research comprising:*
 - **A Common European Platform for Research**, *which provides competitive funding for basic research through the European Research Council (ERC), to which an increasing component of Framework Programme funding should be allocated at the earliest opportunity; enables and supports researcher mobility; simplifies the regulatory and IP environments; facilitates but does not prescribe trans-European networks; supports technology platforms; and creates a simple, common and inexpensive patent framework.*
 - **Exploitation of the scale of the European economy** *by coordinating the provision of major, expensive infrastructure and facilities available to the best talents throughout Europe; and coordinating the development and funding of globally significant research projects.*

¹ European Commission. *The European Research Area: New Perspectives*. COM (2007) 161.

- The ERA should **not** develop, as suggested in the Green Paper, with overall European-level “coordination of national and regional research activities, programmes and policies”; and “initiatives implemented and funded at European level”. Such a development would make articulation with the diversity of national and regional efforts and priorities difficult, clumsy and ineffectual, and would tend to stifle bottom-up initiatives.
- In contrast to the ERC, which can fulfil a pan-European enabling function, we do not believe that the proposed European Institute of Technology can be an effective catalyst for economic development, as economic benefit tends to be delivered in a regional context and is best driven by regional priorities through regional efforts.
- The Commission must recognise the vital role of universities, particularly comprehensive, research-intensive universities, as immensely entrepreneurial institutions with an unrivalled capacity or potential for flexible response to many modern issues, particularly the imperative for inter-disciplinary issues, and in acting as powerful attractors of the best talents.
- In contrast, long-term, highly focused missions are best pursued through specialised government institutes, whilst “intermediary institutions” have become more important as proxy agents for the often missing, demand-pull on the research base.
- There is a structural problem in European universities, which have tended to converge towards a single model of the basic research-focused institution. There are two other crucial demands that need to be satisfied: one for a much greater participation rate in higher education, and the other for greater diversity in the provision of skills, and support for innovation and regional development.
- The importance of the research base in supporting economic and social well-being and for planetary sustainability is now so great that public confidence in its use, and involvement in its direction, are crucial parts of what must become a public rather than private enterprise. An effective European forum whereby European- and national-level public engagement processes can be coordinated and the research base more effectively involved is an important priority.

- *We conclude that an ERA could be a powerful stimulus for European research and its application, but this will only be realised if the benefits to individual member states are made clear and if EU-level initiatives are planned and implemented in ways that demonstrate how they can add value to the European research effort: and how they contribute to an emerging “ecology” for an ERA in which the European, national and local processes interact optimally. It is important to create confidence that the Commission can efficiently develop and discharge policies for the research base based on rigorous and persuasive analysis.*