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Coimbra Group Comments to the ERA Framework Public Consultation *Areas of untapped potential for the development of the European Research Area* Document accompanying the on-line public consultation questionnaire on the ERA framework

If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?

Albert Einstein

General remarks

The consultation launched by the European Commission to develop the European Research Area (ERA) is welcomed by the Coimbra Group as an opportunity to contribute to the further strengthening of collaboration in Europe and beyond in the areas of research and development. Notably, the efforts to strengthen the research infrastructures are particularly welcome and the initiatives already taken with ESFRI are appreciated among universities of the Coimbra Group. Coordinated assistance and access to otherwise inaccessible infrastructures are one of the ways in which to support research institutions and researchers and to foster creativity, especially in view of the constantly and exponentially growing research data. In contrast to the efforts noted concerning infrastructures, it is disappointing to see that the initiatives mentioned and proposed in the document are embedded in a general presentation of European research as essentially underperforming and steeped in systemic failures. Initiatives to promote the ERA could have far greater impact if combined with incentives for universities and research institutions to organise strategic research in clusters and with a move towards institutional partnerships in research and research training. The basic research unit remains the national university, research institution or private corporation. Transnational calls and programmes therefore often address an inherently atomised audience, which tends to respond to calls on an *ad hoc* basis. Furthermore, the European Commission, in spite of the creation of the European Research Council (ERC), continues to favour project funding, as do most governments by replacing increasingly large portions of their research budgets with short-term competitive project funding. This drains the research community of precious research time to prepare project applications, instead of focusing on long-term basic research. Moreover, those research institutions, so central to the research effort, hardly appear in the document as key players.

In the following the Coimbra Group would like to focus on three areas of particular interest in the consultation document: a) doctoral training and research careers, b) the concept of mobility and c) the absence of the humanities and social sciences from the document.

a) Doctoral Training and Research Careers

As an introductory note to this section it is necessary to underline that being a researcher is not in itself a profession; researchers are qualified to undertake independent research activities and can and do have many and varied professions, something which is important to transmit to the next generation of researchers and therefore forms an essential part of all transferable skills courses.

In view of the importance given to doctoral training in this document it should be underlined that the challenges go far beyond just the quality of doctoral training as mentioned in the opening paragraphs.

It would have been helpful if the consultation document could have addressed the issue of the increase in the number of doctoral candidates, and in particular, their need for research careers at postdoc level. It would also be useful, notably in connection with the claim that Europe will need a million researchers in the near future, to discuss the changes needed in the composition of postdoc careers as more and more doctoral candidates are and will need to be looking for careers outside academia. This does have implications for doctoral training in a future ERA.

The so-called “persistent one-to-one doctoral candidate-supervisor relationship and weak emphasis on the role of mentorship” need to be clarified. First of all, one-to-one supervision is only a problem if it is not embedded in clear, responsible overall structures for doctoral schools, programmes, etc. As such, one-to-one supervision remains an important element also in structured doctoral training schools and programmes. The term ‘mentorship’ should be clarified to express the responsibility of supervisors and institutions to support and advise postdocs in their search for research careers.

The generally vague references to the “suitable jobs” and the claim that Europe will need a million new researchers are never followed up by any indications of where the jobs for those researchers are to be found, except for the reference to the number of researchers now nearing retirement. Seen from the view of the universities that train the future researchers, the prospects are not positive while there continues to be a lack of sufficient funding of long-term basic research. The consultation paper does not provide indications, but the posts are unlikely to be found in industry, in spite of the fact that closer co-operation with industry is strongly recommended. The trend over the past decade has been for industry to outsource a large amount of their research endeavours, whereas the humanities and social sciences are among the areas which have seen the most explosive development over the same period, the creative and cultural industries generating more than double of the car industry and considerably more than the ITC industry with €654 billion in 2003 alone and with a growth rate of nearly 20 per cent (cf. comments under section c; ref. “Mapping out the economy of culture in figures”, 2003, http://ec.europa.eu/culture/pdf/doc887_en.pdf). In a society which is no longer dependent on manufacturing industries, the service and entertainment sectors have grown to encompass more than two-thirds of the labour force, a development which will continue unabated in a knowledge society.

‘Attractive employment and working conditions’ are indeed crucial problems given the chronic underfunding of universities, but this is hardly an issue that can or should be dealt with at European level. There are, however, a few urgent issues that could, such as portability of grants and pension entitlements. The Pan-European Pension Fund idea seems a timely initiative as pension entitlements are among the most serious obstacles to mobility among senior researchers. For early and mid-career researchers the hugely diverse career structures and the lack of definition of the role of researchers in universities are the most challenging, and it is indeed possible that the EU funding culture of short-term projects could exacerbate this problem. Research positions have become available through funding instruments such as the RTD Framework Programmes, but they have fundamentally changed the career model for academics from tenure to short or medium-term contracts. If the ERA is to be made genuinely attractive, there need to be clearly defined career paths. Funding instruments which, for example, provide a fairly generous package to institutions (salary and overheads) for five years on the condition that the institution mainstreams the positions could create an embryonic European tenure track model.

b) The Concept of Mobility

In a document which deals with the initiatives needed to enhance the importance of the ERA and “realise the high level of ambition for ERA as called for by the EU Heads of State and Government in 2011”, there ought to have been a much more elaborate and diversified concept of mobility. In the consultation document, the concept is limited to the physical mobility of individuals, where it should have been about the mobility of ideas, of persons, of clusters, including virtual mobility and networking. Physical mobility of individuals is too modest an ambition and, if a more international/European research culture in the ERA is to be encouraged, it will be necessary to focus much more on the internationalisation of doctoral training and early stage researchers, thus creating a new internationally networked generation of early career researchers. A knowledge-based society needs mobile, flexible, adaptable persons as well as ideas.

In terms of physical mobility as such, the consultation document does not distinguish between cross-sectoral mobility and cross-border mobility in spite of the fact that they demand very different approaches. Apart from the Erasmus Mundus Programme and a few other programmes, it remains a weakness for the ERA that Member States and universities tend to collaborate with the major players (mainly the BRICS) in the global research community only on a bilateral basis. This weakens the visibility of the ERA outside Europe, as well as the impact of global collaboration. Platforms for a more collaborative approach to global research co-operation should be considered, and should also foster integrity with regard to market and trade agreements, IPR regulations and similar. Finally, forms of short-term mobility particularly for leading researchers could also be promoted.

c) The absence of the humanities and social sciences

All through the consultation document science and technology are the only target areas mentioned and, even more surprisingly, concepts such as interdisciplinarity and transferability of knowledge are also absent. The heterogeneity of the humanities and social science research fields across Europe is even greater than that of the sciences, given the diversity of themes, research cultures and dissemination languages across Europe. In order to tackle the great societal challenges in Europe, strong cross-border and cross-disciplinary cooperation is clearly needed in and with these areas as well.

There is an underlying assumption in the document, especially in sections 2.5 'International dimension of ERA' and 2.6 'Managing and monitoring the ERA partnership, cross-cutting issues and next steps', that stronger European coordination and harmonisation of national policies and strategies will make the ERA more effective by eliminating inconsistencies and fragmentation. This could be a potentially dangerous trend: diversity across Europe is not always a disadvantage in terms of concerted action, but is also one of its core strengths. This is certainly true of the humanities, which often reflect national or regional environments, issues and concerns and bring these into the wider European debate.

Similarly, the weakness of funding opportunities for the humanities and social sciences should be addressed; low levels of funding constitute an Achilles heel for a genuine internationalisation effort, by excluding disciplines covering a very large number of doctoral candidates. To this should be added that the creative and cultural industries demand the highest qualifications, with an average qualification level above other industries.

In this connection, it should not be forgotten that, alongside strong discipline-based research, many new ideas and developments arise also from cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary research efforts, two essential building blocks of a knowledge society in need of much improved funding opportunities.

The Coimbra Group
29 November 2011