



The Save British Science Society

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SBS 04/08

A fair and transparent system of distributing European taxpayers' money to European scientists

SBS response to the consultation on the 7th European Union Framework Programme

1. Save British Science is pleased to submit this response to the Government's consultation on the next framework programme. SBS is a voluntary organisation campaigning for the health of science and technology throughout UK society, and is supported by over 1,500 individual members, and some 70 institutional members, including universities, learned societies, venture capitalists, financiers, industrial companies and publishers.

2. We have not used the template, but have addressed the issues that we think are of most interest.

The purpose of EU research funding

3. The only specific purpose set out in the Treaty of Amsterdam for research activities in the EU is "strengthening the scientific and technological bases of Community industry" and this must be done "whilst promoting all of the research activities deemed necessary by virtue of other Chapters of this Treaty".¹

4. The other activities "deemed necessary" are difficult to define, since it is not clear who is to do the deeming, or on what basis. SBS interprets the current consultation, restricted to the Framework Programme, as being specifically about the main, specified, aim of assisting industry.

5. Whether or not the budget of €90bn is appropriate depends entirely on what is to be done with the money. If, for example, the EU decides that its basic research activities should be expanded, then new money will be required and the budget will need to be adjusted accordingly. It is impossible to say whether the current figure is the right one until these are answered.

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Basic research

6. Basic research is the fundamental bedrock of all subsequent scientific and technological progress, and there is no reason why the Treaty's requirement for research to help build industrial capacity should preclude basic research. There is thus no logical reason why the EU's research programmes have been biased in favour of applied research up until now.

7. If the EU decides to expand basic research, *it absolutely must not do at the expense of the British national budget*. At the moment, the UK "attributes" European expenditure to national departments of state, and reduces the home budget accordingly. It would be a *total and unmitigated disaster* if money were to be diverted in this way from the Research Councils into a specific programme of basic research at European level. There is not enough money available to fund all the excellent British scientific proposals that the Research Councils currently receive, and money must not, under any circumstances, be diverted away from that funding stream.

Scientific Excellence and European political objectives

8. While some people believe that funds should be directed exclusively towards the best scientific ideas and projects (as the rules specify), others perceive the Framework Programme as an instrument of social policy, in which funds are deliberately skewed towards countries and regions in greatest need of economic assistance.

9. Indeed, one Cambridge Professor told the House of Commons Science & Technology Committee that: "We heard earlier on [from SBS] that maybe the EU funding is not necessarily judged purely on absolute peer review. That is certainly true, and it is deliberate, and it actively forces us to build collaborations with developing communities, where people are talented but they do not have the resources."²

10. Sir William Stewart, when he was Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK Government in the 1990s, believed that money was being diverted "from the budgets...which support science for use in support of European policy".³

11. Suspicions that EU research funds are not distributed according to a clear scientific rationale were shared by the Independent Expert Panel that undertook a five-yearly assessment of the Framework Programme in 1999. The panel suggested that the European Union needed a research policy, "a policy which does not exist today".⁴

12. The panel also concluded that the "results of projects...were not adequately communicated or utilised" and that "an urgent review is needed of the

...procedures needed to deliver”. Although the panel members felt that “[t]he work conducted within collaborative projects funded by the Framework Programme needs to be of a high quality if the research base of the EU is to remain world class,” their report, somewhat damningly, did not contain any statement that this was indeed the case.

13. It is unclear to what extent the Framework Programme is aimed at funding world-class science and technology, and to what extent it is aimed at knowledge transfer. This leads to unhealthy confusion about the criteria for the selection of projects, and makes it difficult to believe that member states are obtaining value for money for their contributions to the EU Framework Programme. It was disturbing that when an EU official was challenged about SBS’s concerns in November 2002, that “the ‘Euro Shoe’ project to customize shoes” was cited as “one of the many successes...that the Framework Programme encourages”.⁵

A two-fold approach in the expanded Europe

14. The pursuit of excellence in science, and the transferring of skills from rich countries to poorer ones are two completely different things. They cannot both be achieved by the same blunt instrument. Either the Framework Programme needs to decide to which it will pursue, or, if both aims are to be pursued, then two quite separate mechanisms must be developed to achieve them both.

15. The number of researchers in the EU grew by about 10% when enlargement occurred earlier this year.⁶

16. However, because it is ambiguous what they are supposed to fund, the funding mechanisms in the EU at the moment will serve both the new countries and the old poorly. Unless there is some radical change, the new scientists of the poorer countries, will get a tiny share of the money, and what they do get will not be targeted either at supporting their existing strengths or at developing new potential. So the richer taxpayers of Europe will get annoyed at their money being wasted, and the 100,000 researchers who have joined the EU will not actually get what they really want or need.

July 2004

¹ *Consolidated Version of the Treaty Establishing the European Community*, Article 163 [known as the Treaty of Amsterdam or the Treaty of Rome as amended by the Treaty of Amsterdam].

² *UK Science & Europe: Value for Money?*, 6th Report of the House of Commons Science & Technology Committee, Session 2002-2003, Volume II, Question 47.

³ *EU Framework Programme for European Research & Technological Development*, 2nd Report of the House of Lords Select Committee on Science & Technology, Session 1996-1997, Volume II, Question 413.

⁴ *Five-Year Assessment of the EU Research and Technological Development Programmes 1995-1999*. European Commission, 2000.

⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 20 November 2002.

⁶ *OECD Science & Technology Statistics*.