

Letters from the EU Party Leaders 2014

In the run-up to the 2014 European Elections, CaSE and Euroscience published the responses of the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, UKIP, the Green Party, Plaid Cymru and the SNP, to our questions on their EU science and engineering policies covering research, skills, innovation and evidence-based policymaking.

The Conservative Party response from Vicky Ford MEP

Conservative MEPs have continually defended the national sovereignty of our education system but we have also promoted the sharing of best practice across the EU and educational exchange in promoting innovative practices that provide real opportunities for people. We want to equip people (especially young people) with practical skills, in areas such as engineering, and real world experience so that they can benefit stakeholders in the science and engineering sphere and ultimately promote growth in the economy.

With regard to the EU's involvement in contributing to the development of science and engineering skills, researchers are already able to benefit from established programmes such as Marie Curie Actions and student exchanges associated with 'Erasmus' and Conservatives will continue their strong support for these initiatives. There are also funding for projects under Erasmus+ which enable organisations to offer work experience, job shadowing and training. Equally, we see value in educational partnerships where institutions can share and transfer innovative and best practices.

Conservative MEPs strongly support collaboration and cooperation on research with other EU countries at all levels, from individual researchers to universities to businesses. It is vital that EU research funding is awarded on the basis of excellence where money must go to the best projects, increasing participation is important but not at the cost of excellence.

EU programmes provide the opportunity to drive research, and results, further than might be possible under national budgets. By reflecting national funding priorities, the EU's research programmes must continue to recognise that developing new technologies and innovative products and services is vital to restoring the competitiveness of EU economies in the global market. UK universities have been the largest recipients of funding from the European Research Council, who launch cutting edge research projects, and with its budget increase we will continue to press the case for UK institutions to continue to take even more of a lead in their frontier research projects.

Conservative MEPs recognise that high quality research is only one step in the process and we will therefore actively encourage and support innovative projects and companies, small and large, in order to facilitate the transfer of research knowledge into job and wealth-creating enterprises. The new streamlined funding model available under Horizon 2020 should help to

encourage wider industry participation and the introduction of the SME instrument will also be a boost to those eligible firms.

We have campaigned to cut the bureaucratic paperwork that faces scientists when they take part in EU funded programmes as well as the high costs to even apply and we are glad to see that significant strides towards simplification were made during Horizon 2020 negotiations. We will continue to monitor the Commission and EU decisions closely to ensure unnecessary processes do not creep back in. We hope that this simplification will help to drive the further involvement of industry who have too often in the past been put off by the application procedure alone.

Access to finance is a crucial issue that has become increasingly evident since the offset of the financial crisis and EU funding financing for industry is already available in the form of grants, loans and, in some cases, guarantees. However the EU needs to do more to cut red-tape that will free businesses from unnecessary burdens being placed upon them. In this regard we must closely monitor the new capital requirements legislation to ensure that it is not having an adverse effect on access to capital as this will directly hit firms operating within the science and engineering sphere.

In addition, EU provides a series of non-financial assistance measures, such as the COSME programme and business support services that encourage cross-border cooperation and collaboration.

It is without question that policy making at the EU level needs to be much more evidence-based to take advantage of the wealth of scientific knowledge at our disposal. We acknowledge the steps the Commission have taken to ensure wider use of impact assessments when drawing up legislative proposals but are concerned that the Impact Assessment Board (IAB) is an internal department within the commission. To ensure less political and more scientific/evidence-based policy the IAB must be independent.

Following on from this, Conservative MEPs will continue to push for impact assessments to be used throughout the legislative process – for example, the final legislation agreed by the European Parliament and Council is not subject to an impact assessment even though it might be vastly different from the Commission's original proposal.