

view from the top robert braun

Excellent research is focused on citizens, not citations

Many observers of EU research policy see the European Research Council as an example to follow in revitalising European research policy and funding.

These include Peter Tindemans, secretary-general of EuroScience. Writing in *Research Europe* in August [RE 3/8/17, p7], he contrasted the ERC's clarity of mission and focus on excellence with the "buzzwords" trotted out by the European Commission's expert group on research and innovation, chaired by Pascal Lamy.

Tindemans criticised the group's report, intended to shape the next Framework programme, for embracing the 'three Os'—open science, open innovation and open to the world—promoted by research commissioner Carlos Moedas. Last year's buzzword, 'responsible research and innovation', was, he noted, absent from the report.

In fact, while the Lamy report does not refer directly to this term, its vision is clear. An ambition to better embed research and innovation in society runs through the document. The report has its shortcomings, but this is a move in the right direction. European research and innovation policies need to be less top-down, and more socially inclusive, sustainable and focused on citizens.

Framework 9 should not aim to spend larger sums on doing more of the same. Definitions of scientific excellence, based on publication records or peer review, are not as solid as some would like to believe; the ERC has been criticised for favouring researchers working in fashionable locations and fields, and for being biased against interdisciplinary research.

Basing policy on a narrow idea of scientific excellence complemented by tick-box exercises on ethics and gender balance will not make Europe more competitive or create a dynamic, knowledge-based economy. The present course has resulted in far too many publications to be read, too little reproducibility of results, and too many ethically questionable research practices. PhDs and postdocs are treated not as human capital to be nurtured and encouraged, but as a resource to be used up and replaced.

Instead, scientists should embrace and do more responsible research and innovation, not less. This will also mean redefining scientific excellence in more socially inclusive and open terms.

Research is excellent if its agendas and methods are made in collaboration with society: by considering, for example, issues around gender that go beyond numbers of women contributors, and by engaging

with the ethics of innovation and the responsibility that researchers bear for their discoveries and inventions.

The Lamy group's report stresses the importance of mobilising and involving citizens in research. This must go beyond public consultation on research priorities. All those who are affected by research deserve a voice in the debate, and a chance to give their opinions on the societal benefits that science and technology claim to offer, and the responsibilities of those who pursue them.

At present, research and innovation policy tends to dodge these issues, allowing the most powerful actors and lobbyists to set the agenda, prioritising the interests of industry and offering technological fixes to societal problems. This approach has left the EU short of reaching the goal set out in the Lisbon strategy of 2000, of making the EU "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world" by 2010.

My colleagues and I have been working to understand how responsible research and innovation could be built into EU and national research systems. Our project, *NewHoRRizon*, is looking at the whole of Horizon 2020, convening 18 'social labs' that cover all aspects of the programme to assess, analyse and experiment with ways to better embed research and innovation in society.

In these labs, people from all areas with high stakes in research and innovation discuss how policy can better respond to social needs. This is co-creation of knowledge at its best. Findings should inform Framework 9 and beyond.

Competing with America need not mean mimicking it. European universities could instead seek to lead the world on openness and in adopting more collaborative, less hierarchical approaches to teaching, interdisciplinary research and entrepreneurship. This could be complemented by a more inclusive culture that embraces risk and failure—for example in the form of 'failure CVs' and adding failed proposals to applications—as a cornerstone of exploratory research at the frontiers of science.

Instead of calling responsible research and innovation or openness buzzwords, the aim should be to understand what it means to harness the knowledge and expertise of Europe's citizens and institutions. Instead of betting everything on the ERC, the EU and its researchers need to be more open to engaging and mobilising the broadest number of people, with real stakes and alternative sets of knowledges, in research and innovation.

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