

Research Management AS Position Paper

On the Need for a New Impact Evaluation Tool to Improve Societal Benefits Resulting from Individual EU-funded Research and Innovation Projects

Executive Summary

This Position Paper identifies a need for expanding the EU Commission's Research and Innovation funding program management toolkit with a new impact evaluation tool. Though the selection process for EU research and innovation funds has always been extremely competitive, and only the best proposals are supported, the funding management toolkit is not sufficient for achieving maximum societal value from these EU research and innovation projects, at present.

In particular, our focus in this initiative is on a longstanding, continuing structural weakness in the EU's research and innovation funding programs. Simply stated, there is a lack of meaningful follow-up, by the Commission, of individual project impacts in the post-funding phase. An important consequence of this weakness is that there are relatively few projects and consortia showing a commitment to achieving their project's longer-term exploitation goals and societal impacts in the months and years after final payments have been disbursed by the Commission. These are goals and impacts that have been mandated in work programs, foreseen and described in winning proposals, and further refined and elaborated in project reports and deliverables. This weakness is most visibly manifested as a general absence of post-project information to be found in CORDIS¹. The result is that a key element of transfer of knowledge and experience from the consortium to the rest of the world that could potentially be highly useful to multiple stakeholders beyond the individual project partners is missing from most EU projects. An additional, related consequence is that a moral hazard is introduced that permits (and even encourages) the most successful players, with the highest number of funded projects, to underperform in the post-project space.

The purpose of the new tool would be to strengthen the societal impacts of current and future Horizon Europe projects and the wider European Research Area, but also previous projects from past European research and innovation framework programs, particularly Horizon 2020 and FP7. A funding priority to set in motion the development of the tool would fit exceptionally well thematically, as a call topic, within the 'Widening participation and spreading excellence, and reforming and enhancing the European R & I system' component of Horizon Europe, as it would be aimed directly at reforming and enhancing both Horizon Europe and the European Research Area. An advance of this type would provide a top-down means for the Commission to ensure accountability for longer-term impacts in all funded projects, resulting in an improvement in the excellence of the framework program approach and a better return on the substantial societal investment that EU-funded research and innovation activities represent for the tax-paying EU public.

¹ CORDIS, the Community Research and Development Information Service, is the primary source of results from the projects funded by the EU's framework programs for research and innovation, from FP1 to Horizon Europe.

Background: The status quo

Though the framework program project selection process has always been extremely competitive, and only the best proposals are funded, the funding management toolkit is not sufficient for achieving maximum societal value from these projects, at present. We examine why this is the case in the paragraphs below.

The message that is continually propagated in the media about selection of EU proposals for funding is that the process is based on excellence alone. Proposals are evaluated and ranked in three areas: scientific excellence (progress beyond the state of the art), quality and efficiency of the project implementation, and project impact. The first two relate mostly to the period within a project's funded lifetime. The third one, impact, is however at least equally important in the post-project period, since impacts can take years to be fully apparent. It is the general level of project quality in the post-funding period that we are concerned with here in regard to the status quo of the framework program system for supporting European research and innovation.

The Commission's project management strategy, to ensure excellence in the implementation of the activities set forth in funded proposals, has two distinct and highly disparate phases. During the funded lifetime of the project, management by project officers in Brussels is very top-down. The Commission has strong leverage by virtue of their ability to control payments to the project consortium. Consortia are thus motivated by the need to get their reports approved in order to get access to these funds. Once final payments are made, however, this considerable leverage that the Commission has wielded over a project/consortium essentially disappears. Other than the slight risk of a technical audit, the Commission is finished monitoring a project for continued progress on achievement of longer term impacts from that point onward.

It is important to acknowledge that there are, in recent years, several bottom-up tools that the Commission has developed that are meant to encourage consortia to continue with project activities and to exploit project results after the funding period. These new tools, notably the Horizon Results Platform and the Horizon Results Booster, need to rely mainly on the self-motivation and initiative of individual project consortia if they are to be widely and effectively used. Their relatively recent development and increasing presence demonstrates that the Commission continues to have a high interest in achieving and promoting further project impacts from the post-EU funding project space.

The problem with the status quo

The new tools that the Commission has implemented so far, which include the Horizon Results Platform and the Horizon Results Booster as mentioned above, appeal mainly to self-motivated consortia. That is to say, those that are most likely to want to continue to exploit project results after the project period is completed, of their own interest. There is no requirement to use them, and no penalty for not using them. The Commission's new tools do not provide additional EU (public) funding per se, for covering post-project activities. Rather, they provide free access to services that might not otherwise be available, and to potential investors and influential stakeholders that might otherwise have been difficult or impossible for individual consortia to come in contact with. The tools are thus perhaps less appropriate for projects in which research outcomes are not yet deemed to be worthy of wider exploitation by project consortia that have not been able to secure additional funding for further research and innovation refinements after the EU funding pipeline has dried up.

Beyond these relatively recent positive developments, there is in fact a longstanding, continuing weakness in the management of the framework program funding system. Simply stated, it is a lack of meaningful follow-up of completed framework projects by the Commission. The consequence of the lack of top-down attention by the Commission is that there are few individual projects and consortia showing commitment to, and achievement of, longer-term societal impacts that have been detailed and promised in winning proposals, in the months and years after final payments have been disbursed by the Commission.

This weakness is most visibly manifested as a general absence of post-project information to be found in CORDIS. As project website URLs are slowly and inevitably abandoned by projects over time, and eventually removed from the CORDIS FP7 and H2020 project databases, connection with these projects becomes ever more distant, and ultimately disappears. What remains is a snapshot of project details at or shortly after the funding period has closed. This includes reports and deliverables available by the end of the project, as well as project fact sheets: acronyms, partners, start dates, finish dates, money spent, etc. In fact, in the large majority of cases, no key lessons about long term impacts learned from each project are to be found in the CORDIS databases. This includes exploitation and dissemination pitfalls to avoid post-project; present use and usefulness of developed tools, methodologies and services, where relevant; longer-term wider societal implications of the research that have emerged over time (if there are any, and if not, why not?); and up-to-date, coordinator/consortium contact persons for interested users to obtain additional, current details about the status of a project's impacts. This is unquestionably useful information that would enhance the impacts of each individual project, and therefore, ultimately, of the framework programs themselves. And it is not being collected, widely disseminated and archived in the Commission's own central repository for project data, in large part because the Commission lacks appropriate tools to motivate consortia to adequately perform and report in the post-funding project space.

Thus, a key element of transfer of knowledge and experience from the consortium to the rest of the world that could potentially be highly useful to multiple stakeholders beyond the individual project partners is missing from most EU projects. This includes information about what have been the trajectories, in the months and years after the project period ends, of the individual tools, services and methodologies developed within projects. The result is that valuable, actionable information is continually being lost to the system. This is especially important because a project's total societal impact cannot in most cases be observed within the project period itself. The lack of tools to assess accountability of longer-term project follow-up within the funding management system results in a weakening of the impacts of European framework programs for research and innovation.

Additionally, a moral hazard is introduced that permits (and even encourages) the most successful players, with the highest number of successful proposals, to underperform in this space. Experienced beneficiaries know that they can make inflated promises at the proposal stage in order to stand out above the competition and secure funding, with the knowledge that there is little or no chance of being held accountable for what has been foreseen in terms of outcomes and impacts, after the Commission stops monitoring projects at the close of the funding period. This moral hazard, in fact, gives an advantage to the most experienced, successful beneficiaries and consortia in future framework program funding rounds as well: since these projects do not need to report why they did or didn't achieve the longer-term impacts foreseen in their proposals, they are the only ones who have access to this critical information. Competitors (as well as other interested stakeholders), who might benefit

from knowledge of why a publicly funded project did or did not achieve its longer-term goals and impacts, are left in the dark. Competitors thus potentially fall further behind in subsequent funding rounds in which they might be competing against previous winners (as societal problems are generally solved incrementally over longer time scales, many call topics have a tendency to cyclically reappear with minor changes and updates every several years, and so winners of previous rounds have a built-in advantage in future rounds). Meanwhile, other interested stakeholders, and the tax-paying public in general, including the legislative institutions of the EU (Council of the European Union and European Parliament) as well as the European Commission itself, are left with an incomplete picture of whether the substantial public investment represented by European research and innovation framework program funding, is in reality performing as well as it could and should be.

The solution to the problem

We propose an expansion of the EU Commission's program management toolkit with a new impact evaluation tool that encompasses evaluation of projects' post-funding impact activities. Such a development would set the stage for establishing a top-down means for the Commission to ensure accountability for longer-term impacts in all funded projects, as it would compel project consortia to take seriously their self-elaborated follow up activities in the post-project period. The main objective of the tool would be to improve the societal impacts of Horizon Europe projects and the new European Research Area for research and innovation in the first instance, but also projects from previous European research and innovation framework programs, particularly Horizon 2020 and FP7. This funding priority would fit exceptionally well thematically, as a call topic, within the 'Widening participation and spreading excellence, and reforming and enhancing the European R & I system' component of Horizon Europe, as it would directly be aimed at reforming and enhancing both Horizon Europe and the European Research Area.

Conclusion:

The selection of proposals for funding through European framework programs for research and innovation has always been about excellence: scientific excellence of a proposed project's activities; quality and efficiency of the proposed project implementation; and project impact. The first two relate mostly to activities carried out within a project's funded lifetime. Achieving excellent societal impact, however, means committing to efforts beyond the EU-funded project period. Though excellence is closely monitored by the Commission during the project period, this has not been the case post-project. In fact, there is little accountability after the final payments have been distributed, and consequently, many projects do not commit sufficiently to achieving excellent impacts in the post-funding space. This Position Paper identifies and addresses that problem. In it, we propose that the Horizon Europe Strategic Plan 2025-2027 explicitly include, as a funding priority in the 2025 Horizon Europe work program, expanding the Commission's program management toolkit with a new impact evaluation tool that encompasses evaluation of projects' post-funding impact activities. Such a development would provide a top-down means for the Commission to ensure accountability for longer-term impacts in all funded projects, resulting in an improvement in the excellence of the framework program approach and a better return on the substantial societal investment that EU-funded research and innovation activities represent for the tax-paying EU public.