

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 management toolkit with a new impact evaluation tool for individual projects.

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.

We identify a longstanding, continuing structural weakness in the EU's research and innovation funding programs: 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 strong commitment to fulfilling their projects' 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 are tied to concrete, monitorable project outputs and achievements that have been clearly articulated by consortia in the work plans of their successful proposals, in response to program goals and objectives elaborated in the Commission's work programs which form the basis on which funding priorities and choices are made.

This weakness is most visibly manifested as a general absence of up-to-date post-project results in the CORDIS¹ project databases. This includes information about the trajectories of the individual tools, services and methodologies developed within any given project in the months and years after the project period ends; the longer-term, wider societal implications of the research carried out in a project that have emerged over time since the official project end; and up-to-date coordinator/consortium contact persons for interested users to obtain additional details about the current status of a completed project's impacts.

A key component of transfer of knowledge and experience from a consortium to the rest of the world that could potentially be highly useful to multiple stakeholders beyond an individual project's partners is therefore missing from most EU projects. An additional, related consequence is that a moral hazard is introduced that allows (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. The tool would provide a top-down means for the Commission to ensure accountability for longer-term impacts in all

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.

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.

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 driven in the media by Commission channels is that selection of EU proposals for funding 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 excellence in 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. We are concerned here with the level of excellence being achieved in the post-funding period by individual projects supported by European research and innovation funding programs.

The Commission's project management efforts, which ensure excellence in the implementation of the activities set forth in funded proposals, exhibit two distinct and highly disparate phases for individual projects. 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 to access 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 apparently finished monitoring the project for continued progress on achievement of longer-term impacts from that point onward.

The Commission clearly continues to have a high interest in achieving and promoting further project impacts from the post-EU funding project space. In recent years, several tools have been developed that are meant to encourage consortia to continue with project activities and to exploit project results after the funding period is complete. These new tools, notably the Horizon Results Platform and the Horizon Results Booster, are optional. They rely mainly on the self-motivation and initiative of individual project consortia if they are to be widely and effectively used. This is not enough to compel the great majority of funded projects to do more in the post-funding phase.

The problem with the status quo

The new tools that the Commission has in recent years implemented to promote post-funding phase project impacts are optional for consortia to take advantage of. 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 connect with.

These new tools are a positive development. However, they do not address the longstanding weakness of the lack of comprehensive, long-term follow-up, by the Commission, of individual projects funded in the framework program system. The lack of effective tools for monitoring completed projects means that there are relatively few individual projects and consortia showing a strong commitment to fulfilling their projects' 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 are tied to concrete, monitorable project outputs and achievements that have been clearly articulated by consortia in the work plans of their successful proposals, in response to program goals and objectives elaborated in the Commission's work programs which form the basis on which funding priorities and choices are made.

This weakness is most visibly manifested as a general absence of up-to-date information and results in the CORDIS² project databases for projects that are no longer being funded. As project website URLs are slowly and inevitably abandoned by projects over time, and eventually removed from the CORDIS FP7 and H2020 project databases, the one-stop, publicly accessible link with these projects that CORDIS represents becomes increasingly less relevant, and ultimately disappears. What remains is a snapshot of project details at or shortly after the funding period ended. This typically consists of 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 most cases, no key lessons about long term impacts learned from each project can be found in CORDIS: 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 (Is there a continuing use and usefulness of developed tools, methodologies and services, where relevant?); what are the longer-term wider societal implications of the research that have emerged over time (if there are any, and if not, why not?); and who are the 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.

A key component 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 therefore missing from most EU projects. The result is that valuable, actionable information is constantly being lost from 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 allows (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 to gain an edge in the competition and secure funding, with the knowledge that there is little or no chance of being held

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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 the work programs and 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 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 performing as well as it could and should be.

The solution to the problem

We propose and 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.

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 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.