

Research Management AS Position Paper

On the Benefit of a New Third-Party Certification Methodology to Improve Societal Impacts Resulting from Individual EU-funded Research and Innovation Projects

Executive Summary

This position paper supports the implementation of a new, third-party certification scheme for assessing beneficiaries' commitments to long-term societal impacts from individual EU R&I projects. It is a key component of Research Management's ongoing initiative entitled 'Improving Funding Program Impacts' (IFPI).

Though the selection process for EU research and innovation funds has always been extremely competitive, and only the best proposals are supported, the Commission's 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 constraint in the EU's research and innovation funding programs: with limited resources, the Commission is not able to meaningfully follow-up individual project impacts in the post-funding phase. An important consequence of this resource limitation 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 received by beneficiaries. 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 resource limitation is most visibly manifested in the CORDIS¹ project databases. Updating of results and impacts by the EU Publications Office must stop shortly after the end of the funding phase for each project. 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 may have emerged over time since the official project end; and reliable and up-to-date coordinator/consortium contact persons for interested users to get 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 the dissemination of most EU projects.

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.

An additional, related consequence is that a moral hazard is introduced which increases the risk that successful players participating in multiple funded projects over time can be tempted to underperform in the post-project space.

We propose a new certification scheme that takes account of the commitment of project beneficiaries to implementation of post-funding impact activities. The main purpose of the new certification scheme would be to facilitate strengthening of 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, and to do so in a sustainable way. The scheme would provide a supplemental means for the Commission to ensure accountability for longer-term impacts in all funded projects, without a requirement for extra resources to do this on the Commission side. The result will be 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 Commission's 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.

Selection of EU project proposals for funding is based on excellence. 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 relates mostly to excellence in the period within a project's funded lifetime. The second and third, however, can exhibit significant carryover to the post-project period. This is because amplification of impacts can take years to be fully apparent, and the path to achieving maximum impacts is tied to activities that need to be implemented for these gains to occur. 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 its 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 has essentially no resources for monitoring a project for continued progress on achievement of longer-term impacts from that point onward.

The Commission continues to demonstrate 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 in support of this. These new tools, notably the Horizon Results Platform (HRP) and the Horizon Results Booster (HRB), are exemplary developments.

How to improve the status quo

The HRP and the HRB are a real step forward for promoting valorization of individual projects. However, they do not alleviate the limitation of resources available for a comprehensive, long-term follow-up of every project funded in the framework program system. The lack of budget and personnel for monitoring completed projects means that individual projects and project partners don't necessarily need to demonstrate 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. However, these are goals and impacts that have been tied to concrete, monitorable project outputs and achievements that were 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. Critically, these form the basis on which funding priorities and choices have previously been made and continue to be made in the selection of grant winners.

This limitation is most visibly manifested as a stasis of 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 any given 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 the resources to ensure consortia are adequately committed to implementation 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 can never be observed entirely within the project period itself. The lack of resources 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.

An additional, related consequence is that a moral hazard is introduced which increases the risk that successful players participating in multiple funded projects over time can be tempted to underperform

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in the post-project space. Experienced beneficiaries know that there is, in general, little to lose by making inflated promises about post-funding activities and impacts at the proposal stage, if this can be done in a credible way. The motivation is, of course, to gain an edge at the proposal evaluation and thereby secure funding, in the knowledge that there is not much chance of being held accountable after the Commission stops monitoring projects at the close of the funding period. This moral hazard, not surprisingly, 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 are at risk of falling further behind in subsequent funding rounds in which they might be evaluated against previous winners. This is because societal problems are solved incrementally over longer time scales than a single research project. Consequently, many call topics cyclically reappear with minor changes and updates every several years. Winners of previous rounds therefore have a built-in advantage in future funding 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.

We propose a new certification scheme that encompasses evaluation of the commitment of project beneficiaries to implementation of post-funding impact activities. Such a development would result in an external, supplemental means for the Commission to ensure accountability for longer-term impacts in all funded projects, without the need for an internal increase in budget and manpower dedicated to this task. It would compel project consortia to take seriously their self-elaborated follow up activities in the post-project period. The main objective of the scheme 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. Realization of this new certification tool is an important element of Research Management's ongoing initiative entitled 'Improving Funding Program Impacts' (IFPI).

Conclusion:

The selection of proposals for funding through European framework programs for research and innovation is based on excellence: scientific excellence of a proposed project's activities; quality and efficiency of the proposed project implementation; and project impact. The first relates mostly to activities carried out within a project's funded lifetime. Achieving excellent societal impact, however, means committing to implementation efforts beyond the EU-funded project period. Though excellence is closely monitored by the Commission during the project period, this has not been feasible in the post-project space. The result of this is that there is little beneficiary accountability after the final payments have been distributed, and consequently, many projects do not commit sufficiently to achieving excellence in long-term impacts. This position paper identifies and addresses that limitation. In it, we propose a certification tool that encompasses evaluation of beneficiaries' commitments to post-funding impact activities. Such a development would provide a supplemental, self-sustaining 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. This development is a key component of Research Management's multi-year 'Improving Funding Program Impacts' (IFPI) initiative.