

Research RTD, 7th EC Framework Programme 2007-2013: specific programme "Ideas", frontier research

2005/0186(CNS) - 21/09/2005 - Legislative proposal

PURPOSE: To establish a specific programme entitled “Ideas” within the context of the EU’s 7th research framework programme.

PROPOSED ACT: Council Decision

CONTENT: The European Commission is presenting five “specific programmes” in follow up to the approval of the 7th Framework Programme in April 2005. The first relates directly to actions funded under the Joint Research Centre. The other four are entitled: Co-operation, Ideas, Peoples and Capacity. The one under discussion here is the Ideas specific programme.

Background:

The restructuring of the RT&D framework programmes is a bid by the European Commission to help the EU achieve its goal of becoming the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010 and to help the EU realise its ambition of devoting 3% of GDP to RT&D by the same date. The specific programmes identified by the Commission have been designed to address major weaknesses in the level, quality and impact of European research. Their creation represents a further consolidation of the European Research Area by offering financial support to the free movement of ideas, knowledge and researchers. The re-structuring of the programmes includes a number of core innovations, including, for example, allowing researchers (under some actions) to identify topics for future funding. Other advances include the setting up of a Risk-Sharing Facility to improve access to EIB loans for large scale European actions and the establishment of a European Research Council under the Ideas initiative. The Commission is also looking to overhaul the management methods of the framework programme by introducing improved efficiency drives through the externalisation of administrative tasks to an executive agency, seeking a clearer presentation of evaluation criteria, guaranteeing transparent work programmes and streamlining procedures for approving projects.

Specific programme – Ideas:

Possibly one of the most innovative of the five specific programmes being proposed, the Ideas initiative seeks to address the growing angst within Europe that it is failing to deliver the kind of outstanding research required if it is to become the most competitive, knowledge based economy in the world by 2010. The aim of the Ideas programme is to provide a pan-European mechanism to support truly creative scientists, engineers and scholars, whose curiosity and thirst for knowledge will result in unpredictable and spectacular discoveries. A key term linked to the Ideas programme is “frontier research”. This term reflects the Commission’s recognition that basic research is an intrinsically risky endeavour involving the pursuit of fundamental advances in science and technology without regard for established disciplinary boundaries or national borders.

In order to enact its objective of creating a frontier driven research community, the programme will follow an investigator driven approach whereby researchers will be given the freedom to choose the scope of their own topics. Grants will be provided for individual teams, leaving the flexibility for a team to consist of any grouping of researchers appropriate for the conduct of the projects – from one single institution or

several institutions. The scope for funding could include engineering, socio-economic sciences and humanities. In all cases scientific excellence and not administrative requirements should drive the team's formation.

Heading up and investigating the proposed research topics will be the European Research Council. Its establishment represents a new departure for the EU and will consist of two arms. Firstly, an independent Scientific Council and secondly a dedicated implementing structure. To make it effective, the ERC will operate according to the principles of trust, credibility and transparency. It should guarantee a high degree of autonomy and integrity, while being consistent with the requirements for accountability. Further, the ERC is expected to act independently of any political or any other vested interests.

Concerning the first branch of the ERC, the Scientific Council, it will be made up of European scientists, recruited from the highest echelons of the scientific community. They will be appointed by the European Commission following an independent procedure in which their credibility is verified. The Council will be mandated to develop a scientific strategy for the programme. A number of factors must be taken into account when preparing the scientific strategy including: identifying Europe's specific needs, the establishment of a work programme, (which can be, if necessary be modified), preparing calls for proposals, setting criteria and defining specific topics for research. Criteria will be based on the conclusions of peer reviewed evaluations, which in turn will form the basis on which proposals will be funded. In addition the Scientific Council is expected to monitor the quality of operations and evaluate the programmes implementation. Where necessary is should make recommendations for corrective actions.

Concerning the second branch of the European Research Council, namely the dedicated implementation structure, the Commission proposes that it be responsible for the programmes execution in accordance with the annual work programme. The implementation structure will be headed up by an Executive Agency, which will oversee the implementation of evaluation procedures, peer reviews, the selection process in accordance with the principles set out by the Scientific Council and the management of financial grants.

Lastly, the European Commission proposes that it act as guarantor of the ERC's full autonomy and integrity as well as ensuring that the Ideas programme is executed according to the scientific objectives set out by the programme. As a general rule, the Commission will adopt the work programme as proposed by the Scientific Council. Should the Commission fail to adopt the work programme; its reasons will be stated publicly.

For further information concerning the financial implications of this measure, please refer to the financial statement.