

Position paper on the Common Strategic Framework for EU Research and Innovation Funding

The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) welcomes the proposed common strategic framework for EU Research and Innovation Funding (CSF), which intends to unite all European research and innovation programmes under one roof and to provide synergies with other relevant European programmes. The SNSF supports most of the ideas mentioned, such as the European Commission's commitment to excellence, its focus on instruments with a proven European added value and its intention to avoid duplication and fragmentation. With this paper the SNSF would like to comment on a number of topics raised in the Green Paper and respond to the consultation.

Excellence and cohesion – two important targets that must not be mixed

The SNSF strongly supports the notion of excellence as the central evaluation criterion for all instruments in the CSF. Lowering the standards would have negative effects on Europe as a leading location for research and innovation and would clearly endanger its global competitiveness in the long run.

In order to make Europe stronger as a whole, it is important to spread excellence and to build capacity in regions that are currently lagging behind. However, it is crucial to clearly separate these two agendas: the instruments within the CSF must fund research and innovation solely on the principle of excellence. Other European funding programmes, i.e. the structural funds and the cohesion funding instruments, should be used to create a level-playing field within the European Research Area (ERA). The following examples illustrate the separation of targets and funds:

- The European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI) roadmap needs to be realised selecting the “best locations” for the “best research”. On the other hand, the SNSF suggests that cohesion funding instruments be used to build and maintain infrastructures in regions that need additional funds to catch up and are willing to reform their own structures.
- Parts of the cohesion funding instruments should be used to fund European Research Council or Marie Curie proposals, which are above the quality line, but below the funding line and which are aiming at a country whose success rate is below average.

The SNSF also would like to underline the responsibility of all countries within the ERA to provide their researchers with the framework conditions necessary to make them competitive at the European level. This is particularly relevant when it comes to supporting young researchers and to investing the agreed funds into research and technological development.

Stronger support for basic, investigator-driven research

The SNSF reiterates its request for a strong support of basic, investigator-driven research as the foundation of all applied research and innovation endeavours. Only active and strong basic research ensures a fresh supply of knowledge and ideas that feed into applied research, as well as into the envisaged “Science for Society” and “Science for Growth” pillars. The SNSF asks for sufficient funding to be provided for the “Knowledge for Science” pillar.

- The ERC for example offers great support of basic, investigator-driven research and should be reinforced, both financially as well as with regard to its autonomy. All disciplines need to be supported; the Social Sciences and Humanities and interdisciplinary research must be taken care of as well. The governance of the ERC must be independent and the decisions taken need to be transparent. The quality standards of its evaluation procedures must be kept very high in order to remain credible.
- Strong instruments, such as the Marie Curie actions and the collaborative research projects, are needed to support investigator-driven research. The SNSF is in favour of more thematically open calls to enable researchers to work on topics they consider important. These instruments must be flexible enough to allow for a variety of research topics and methods, as well as for different sizes of research consortia. These instruments are also important for the collaboration with third countries.

A well-coordinated approach and flexible instruments to meet the Grand Challenges

The SNSF shares the vision that research and innovation should contribute to tackling the Societal Challenges. However, the current variety of instruments is too complex and too redundant. That is why the SNSF proposes to create the means to identify the strategic roadmaps and to ensure the commitment of the relevant partners and stakeholders at national and European level on the one hand while creating a flexible portfolio of instruments when implementing these roadmaps on the other.

- It is crucial to concentrate on only a few relevant challenges that need to be tackled in the beginning, and evaluate the concept in due time. The topics must have a similar level of granularity so that they can be handled similarly.
- The European Innovation Partnerships (EIPs) could develop into effective and efficient coordinating mechanisms at political level if the current portfolio of instruments, such as the Joint Programming Initiatives, Knowledge and Innovation Communities, ERA- and INCO-nets (+) and large-scale instruments like Networks of Excellence and Integrated Projects are streamlined and applied in a flexible way.

- The SNSF underlines the important role of the national research councils when implementing these politically determined roadmaps into concrete research projects, safeguarding excellence and developing common rules and guidelines. Moreover, the SNSF wishes to point out that true added value at European level should be created through a contribution of 50% from the European Commission to such research programme instruments.

Need for balance of power and further simplification of rules and guidelines

In order to make sure the CSF will be successful, even more attention and effort should be dedicated towards achieving a good balance of power and to a further simplification of rules and guidelines:

- The question of top-down and bottom-up lies at the heart of the balance of power between academia, the state and business and industries. The proposal for the CSF clearly indicates a primacy of academia within “Science for Science”, of the state within “Science for Society” and of business and industries in “Science for Growth”. However, as the CSF is ultimately about the best framework conditions for excellent research, the SNSF advises safeguarding a balance of powers:
 - between researchers (bottom-up) and hosting institutions (top-down) in Science for Science;
 - between national (bottom-up) and European level (top-down) on the one hand and state (top-down) and academia (bottom-up) on the other within Science for Society.
- The SNSF again stresses the necessity for easy-to-follow rules that remain valid for the entire duration of the project term and are consistent over all funding instruments. A trust-based approach must be followed, including a Tolerable Rate of Error (TRE) of 3,5%. Moreover, the single registration facility should be enlarged, national accounting systems ex ante certified and full costing ensured.

The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) is the principal Swiss agency promoting scientific research. On behalf of the Swiss Federal government, it supports research projects in all disciplines, from philosophy and biology, to the nanosciences and medicine.

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