Research Europe

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ERC under pressure on lump-sum funding

Leading MEP and former president protest against potential grant-system change at European Research Council

Robin Bisson

Policymakers and research leaders have warned the European Research Council against rushing into broader use of the 'lump-sum' method of grant payments, with the council set to decide in weeks whether to use the method for major grants.

Under lump-sum funding, researchers submit more detailed spending plans in their grant applications and are paid for completing agreed work packages, rather than tracking costs and claiming money back. Trials of the system took place under the EU's 2014-20 R&D programme, and the European Commission plans to roll it out more widely in the 2021-27 programme to simplify grant administration.

There has been concern across the research world about the change, but to date attention has largely focused on collaborative parts of the programme, with warnings that a switch to lump-sum funding could lead established teams to play it safe with their choice of partners.

Now the European Research Council—perhaps the most prestigious funder in the EU system—is considering joining the move to lump sums with its grants, most of which go to individual researchers.

IMAGE: WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, VIA FLICKR

Former European Research Council president Jean-Pierre Bourguignon described the move towards broader use of lump-sum funding as "very risky"

The ERC told Research Europe that its governing Scientific Council would take a decision in June on "whether to move to lump sums, possibly starting with the ERC's 2024 Advanced Grant call". Advanced Grants provide experienced principal investigators with up to €3.5 million, and are the ERC's most prestigious single-PI award.

The news has been met with concern. MEP Christian Ehler, a senior member of the European Parliament research committee, told Research Europe that "a radical move within ERC towards lump sums would be ill-advised".

Ehler said data on the impact of lump-sum funding on projects was "very limited" and that if the ERC wanted to make a big shift to lump-sum funding, "this should be tested thoroughly on a small scale before we make any big moves".

> "A radical move within ERC towards lump sums would be ill-advised."
>
> **Christian Ehler,** a senior member of the European Parliament research committee

The ERC has been using lump-sum funding for its Proof of Concept grants since 2019. These provide €150,000 to researchers who already have ERC funding, to enable them to explore the social or commercial potential of their work.

An ERC spokesperson told Research Europe that the funder is "examining in detail" the implications of a move towards broader use of lump-sum funding before making any final decision.

In March, former ERC president Jean-Pierre Bourguignon described such a move as "very risky".

Speaking at a conference held by France's High Council for Evaluation of Research and Higher Education, Bourguignon said a simplified funding mechanism "may look attractive to scientists", but could distract from the focus on scientific quality in ERC applications.

He fears the use of lump-sum funding would mean projects being "structured along a list of 'deliverables'", and that this would "rigidify" projects and limit "the possibility of an open-ended quest". He suggested researchers could be deterred

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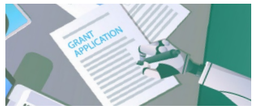

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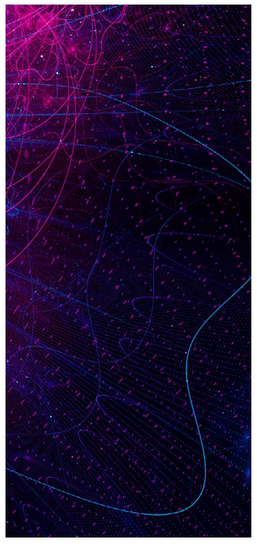

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Slow and steady

Major changes to ERC's granting process must be handled with care

Sarah Richardson, editor

"Complex and error-prone": that is the European Commission's own assessment of the process of funding projects under its R&D Framework Programmes. It's not a phrase to warm researchers' hearts.

Despite efforts to streamline bureaucracy in these schemes in recent years, the Commission—like myriad other research funders—knows it needs to do more. This has led it to pitch a huge roll-out of lump-sum funding, under which researchers submit detailed cost plans up front and are paid for completing work, rather than having the actual costs of projects reimbursed.

Following the Commission's push, the European Research Council—the EU's flagship funder and part of the Framework Programme—is weighing up whether to make a sea change towards lump-sum funding (see cover). This is one of two ERC initiatives aimed at streamlining the process of funding that we look at in this issue. The other, the momentum of which seems to be driven by the funder itself, is even more radical: the use of artificial intelligence to aid peer review of grant applications (see P8).

Both ideas could help reduce administrative burden. But both also raise huge questions in themselves, as well as over the pace at which major changes should be introduced.

Pace is a pressing issue for lump-sum funding. The ERC will decide next month whether to move to this system, possibly starting with its 2024 Advanced Grants call. But some experts have reacted with alarm to the prospect of such a huge shift on arguably the ERC's most prestigious scheme, given its use of the method has so far been limited.

Concerns range from the impact on the ERC's mission to fund genuine blue-skies research—inherently difficult to cost up front—to the diversity of applicants, since lump-sum funding may favour those from better-resourced institutions with experienced research offices to support upfront costing. But underlying all this is a more practical question: whether the method has been tested enough on similar grants to justify such a roll-out.

One of the problems with any upheaval of a bureaucratic system is it's difficult to reverse. A suggestion outlined by Thomas Estermann at the European University Association this week—to give ERC grant winners the choice to go for costs or lump sum—might go some way toward alleviating this, as the old system could be reverted to more easily. It would create a short-term extra burden on the ERC, the resources of which are already under strain, but, if it could be supported, it might offer a balance between experiment and caution.

The ERC seems to have found such a balance over its use of AI in grant awards. The funder has in recent years increased the use of an AI system to generate suggestions for external reviewers, caveating that its use is not compulsory and that it must be used "with care" due to potential issues such as imbalances around gender in its suggestions. After generally positive feedback, the ERC is now exploring deepening its use of AI in the granting process, including to help check bidders' eligibility for calls.

Ideas to streamline the process of research funding will not go away—and nor should they; quite the opposite. But the message to funders needs to be "proceed with caution", and to researchers, where caution is being taken, "be open-minded".

> "One of the problems with any upheaval of a bureaucratic system is it's difficult to reverse."

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BRIEFING WHAT'S GOING ON

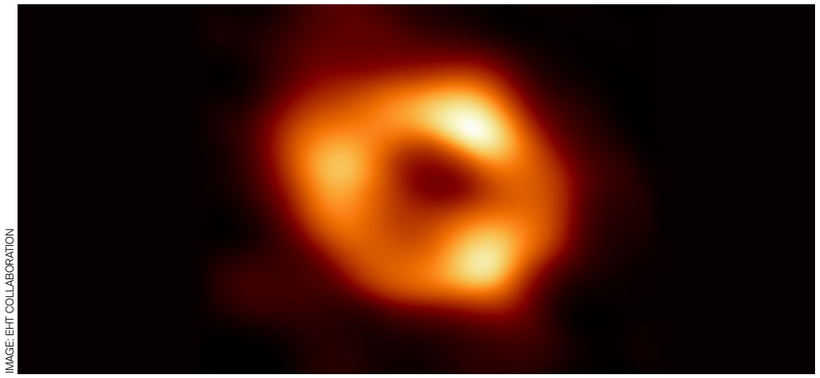


IMAGE: EHT COLLABORATION

The Event Horizon Telescope project, a global collaboration supported in part by a European Research Council Synergy Grant, has produced the first image of the black hole at the centre of our galaxy, the Milky Way. More than 300 researchers at 80 institutes were involved in the work.

Horizon Europe

The European Commission has **added almost €562 million to the Horizon Europe R&D programme** budget for 2021-22, taking the total to nearly €16 billion. Over €500m was allocated to the EU's recently launched R&D missions, and €25m was devoted to supporting researchers fleeing the conflict in Ukraine. The latter allocation, to the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions scheme, which supports international mobility, will provide fellowships for PhD students and postdoctoral researchers to continue their work at institutions in the EU and countries associated to Horizon Europe.

Full story

EU-Japan ties

Japan has started **informal talks on joining the EU's research and innovation programme**, Horizon Europe. In a joint statement, the EU and Japan said that "recognising their vital role in creating new knowledge, we commit to expanding cooperation between our industrial, science, research and innovation and space sectors". Charles Michel, president of the Council of the EU, said "we are extremely pleased on the innovation and research front", adding that "EU and Japanese students and scholars will benefit" from Japanese association to Horizon Europe.

Full story

EIC delays

The European Commission has defended a **further delay in providing funding to dozens of companies** via the EU's European Innovation Council. It said some winners of EIC funding face "an additional delay from the end of April to the end of May/early June" due to the need to meet legal requirements. The affected blend of grant and equity investment is "a novelty for the Commission and the EIC, and we are confident that once the necessary steps are established, things will go much quicker in the next rounds", the Commission said. It added that 30 of 65 companies selected for funding in June 2021 were affected.

Full story

Iter chief dies

Bernard Bigot, the head of the Iter international nuclear fusion research facility that is under construction in France, has **died at the age of 72**. The Iter Organization praised him as an "inspirational leader", adding that he took office in 2015 "at a critical point in Iter's history", when the project was "experiencing significant difficulties", including delays and cost increases. A subsequent "dramatic realignment…has been widely—and correctly—attributed to Dr Bigot's transformational leadership", it said. Deputy director-general Eisuke Tada will take over while the Iter governing council searches for a permanent replacement.

Full story

Innovation support

Research groups have called on the EU to better **support new talent, to boost innovation** in the bloc. In separate papers, the European Association of Research and Technology Organisations and the Cesaer group of universities both said more should be done to support fledgling innovators. Cesaer called for the setting up of a Young Innovator funding programme under the EU's European Innovation Council, while Earto urged the EU to consider creating an "entrepreneur in residence" programme for seasoned entrepreneurs to provide mentorship.

Full story

Academic publishing

Reform of research assessment is needed for the EU's academic publishing platform, Open Research Europe, to become a go-to option for authors, according to one of its scientific advisory board members. At an event to mark one year since its launch, Toma Susi admitted that even he would not publish his best work via Ore, saying it would not give him a career pay-off in the same way as a paper published in a prestigious journal. He said the process by which researchers are assessed needs to give them more incentives to publish their work on such platforms.

Full story

Covid-19 research

Medical advocacy groups have criticised the **"waste" of health-related research** during the Covid-19 pandemic. Transparimed and Health Action International, which campaign for clinical trial transparency and medicine quality, cited inadequate clinical trial design and duplication. They said: "A key reason why decades of efforts to curb research waste have failed to deliver much progress is perpetual buck-passing on this issue between regulators, funders, industry, ethics committees, research institutions and investigators."

Full story

IMAGE: EUROPEAN UNION

Quote of the week

"Defending our fundamental values becomes more imperative than ever."

At the 20th anniversary of the League of European Research Universities, EU R&D commissioner **Mariya Gabriel** warned that "strong science policy is needed in times of growing tensions"

Academic freedom

European research leaders have sounded the alarm over the **erosion of academic freedom globally**. "Academic freedom or academic liberties are clearly in decline around the world," Stéphanie Balme, dean of the College of Sciences at Sciences Po College in Paris, warned at an event on the topic, hosted by the Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm. "There are very different types of attacks [but] all countries in the world are concerned with domestic or international interference."

Full story

Funding allocations

Focusing research resources on solving societal problems such as climate change is a form of "scientific populism" and could be "counterproductive", European Research Council president Maria Leptin has warned. While acknowledging that the world faces "urgent" problems, Leptin said that focusing scientific resources on certain thematic areas could be detrimental because solutions could instead come from seemingly unrelated work. She was speaking at a European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities symposium on transforming science.

Full story

R&I partnerships

EU-funded **research and innovation partnerships should "take more risks"**, the bloc's R&I commissioner has said. Mariya Gabriel gave the push in the foreword to a European Commission report on the partnerships, designed to give a baseline for assessing their performance every two years. They account for 25 per cent of the total budget of the EU's 2021-27 R&D programme and are expected to support the EU's policy objectives. "We want partnerships to have more impact and to make a strong contribution to the EU priorities of green and digital transitions and resilience," Gabriel said.

Full story

Health data

The EU has **launched a digital health-data protection system** so that researchers of rare diseases can use patient data to improve treatments, while upholding their privacy rights. The system, called Spider (Secure Privacy-preserving Identity management in Distributed Environments for Research), was developed by the European Commission's science service, the Joint Research Centre. The JRC said that more than 30 million Europeans live with a rare disease, that their clinical data are fragmented across hundreds of registries on the continent, and that the system would make it easier to find and share such data.

Full story

Micro-credentials

A proposal to develop **unified short-term learning certificates**, known as "micro-credentials", across the EU is too vague, the European Parliament has suggested. To boost adult learning, the European Commission in December proposed the bloc's member states agree on a set of principles for micro-credentials that could be applied across borders, sectors and institutions. But MEPs approved a resolution calling on the Commission to flesh out its proposals with stronger actions to ensure they were followed up with "actual measures" to bring change.

Full story

Open access

EU member state governments have been urged to ensure open-access scholarly publishing **"serves science, not publishers"**, when they adopt a position on the issue next month. The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities warned that the scholarly publishing system is "unsustainable" in its current form. It criticised article-processing charges—which are levied on authors by publishers under the 'gold' model of open access—for exacerbating "the unsustainable situation of journal spending" and creating "unequal access to knowledge". The guild called on governments to support the 'diamond' open-access model, in which no fees are charged to authors or readers.

Full story

Plan S

The open-access initiative Plan S has **asked researchers for feedback** on their experiences when publishing papers in accordance with its principles. Under Plan S, a group of mainly European funders are requiring the researchers they support to make resulting papers openly available immediately and under conditions such as that they or their institutions must retain copyright over their work. The survey will gather anonymised data for Plan S to "understand how to support researchers in their varied publishing journeys".

Full story

EU has ‘incredible opportunities’ in R&D

Dutch minister Robbert Dijkgraaf says European diversity is a strength, but underfunding undermines bloc’s potential

Craig Nicholson in Brussels

Europe has “incredible opportunities” to strengthen its higher education and research systems, but only if it invests enough and focuses on building up its strengths, according to the Dutch science minister.

Robbert Dijkgraaf (pictured), who took on the role of minister of education, culture and science in the new Dutch coalition government in January, said his country and Europe as a whole shared strengths and shortcomings with regard to R&D. While both have hugely talented and diverse researchers, they also suffer from chronic underfunding of research, he said.

“There are also some things that have to be improved in the Netherlands and I think these might be actually the same things that have to be improved in Europe,” Dijkgraaf told a meeting in Brussels.

“We should practise what we preach, which means the things we see as essential to a flourishing education and research system: ample investment; opportunities to travel, to collaborate; a certain amount of flexibility.”

Dijkgraaf formerly led the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton in the United States, which is renowned for giving some of the world’s brightest minds the chance to pursue their goals. He said he thought that talented people were “perhaps the richest resource Europe has”, but that it needed to capitalise on this more.

“We have an incredible amount of talent that we need to develop,” he said. “We have incredible opportunities to add more to our knowledge system.”

Dijkgraaf, a highly regarded theoretical physicist himself, added: “Human talent is something where Europe can actually be, and is, the envy of the world…We should be self-confident and attract the talent, and make sure that everybody feels at home here.”

Speaking at the event hosted by Neth-ER, the Dutch research representation in Brussels, Dijkgraaf said that aspects of Europe “that are sometimes seen as weaknesses” are in fact strengths, in particular its diversity.

IMAGE: CRAIG NICHOLSON FOR RESEARCH PROFESSIONAL NEWS

“Sometimes, people think Europe is so complicated and has such a large inertia, it’s moving so slowly, it has all these different perspectives. But, actually, I think the right metaphor here is an ecosystem: ecosystems with a lot of species are much more stable than monocultures,” he said.

Dijkgraaf cited the success of Cern, the European organisation for nuclear research, as an example of how Europe is able to pull together to be world-leading. But Europe must invest more in R&D to truly capitalise on its abundance of research talent, he urged.

The Netherlands has set a target of spending 2.5 per cent of GDP on R&D “in the coming years”, but only spent 2.18 per cent in 2019.

Dijkgraaf said the new government would be making “substantive investments” in Dutch R&D and that he was “quite confident” it would “at least” reach the country’s target.

ERC under pressure, continued from cover

from acting as proposal evaluators because they would have to assess proposals’ administrative planning in addition to their research merits.

As the shift to lump-sum payments front-loads some financial work into the application process it could hinder smaller organisations with fewer research support staff and those less experienced in applying to EU schemes.

Bourguignon noted that these are exactly the type of institutions the ERC has been trying to encourage recently.

Jan Palmowski, secretary general of the Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities, agreed there is a risk that binding ERC grant winners to deliverables could “stymie blue-skies research”. He said: “The whole point of blue-skies research is that it must be open to unpredicted results and methodologies, which must not be constrained by the choice of funding mechanism.”

The ERC said its Scientific Council will make a change only “if it is confident that the lump-sum model can be made compatible with the existing ERC frontier research principles” and that lump sums “have the potential to simplify the administrative workload for ERC grantees”.

Thomas Estermann, director for governance, funding and public policy development at the European University Association, suggested ERC grant winners could be given a choice of whether to receive funding based on costs or as a lump sum.

“Simplification should always be in the interest of the user and such a choice would quickly show whether lump sums are suitable or not,” Estermann said.

EU’s Russia ban imperils R&D projects

EU funding freeze for Russian public bodies puts collaboration and valuable data sources at risk

Rachel Magee

The EU’s decision to freeze R&D funding to Russian public bodies due to the war in Ukraine has plunged a string of collaborative research projects into uncertainty.

The European Commission told Research Europe that the move announced in April affected 18 ongoing projects funded by the EU’s Horizon 2020 programme, involving 29 Russian organisations awarded a total of €12.6 million in EU contributions.

R&D commissioner Mariya Gabriel said the Commission would “terminate ongoing grant agreements and subsequent payments to Russian public bodies or related organisations”.

This has left the 18 projects—including the CompBat battery project and Arcsar, an Arctic and North Atlantic emergency preparedness network—scrambling for answers.

CompBat’s scientific coordinator Pekka Peljo, from the University of Turku in Finland, said the project had one partner from Russia—Skoltech—and that the situation was “still not quite clear” as Skoltech is a private university.

Arcsar told Research Europe that it had one Russian partner and was “still in dialogue” with the European Research Executive Agency, but that “no formal decision has been made regarding the funding freeze or termination of the partnership”.

Other project teams said the situation was damaging progress on critical global issues including climate change and health.

The International Network for Terrestrial Research and Monitoring in the Arctic is another affected project. It said that the freeze for state-owned organisations had made working with Russian individuals “extremely difficult”.

Project coordinator Margareta Johansson of Lund University in Sweden, and scientific coordinator Terry Callaghan of the University of Sheffield in the UK, said that 21 Russian research stations were involved in their project and that the decision would mean “immensely valuable Russian data” becoming unavailable.

They said that links with Russia had enabled research in Siberia, which has some of the “greatest carbon stores in the world and therefore the potential to mitigate, or accelerate, global warming”. They added: “The war in Ukraine and the isolation of Russia may take decades to generate new trust during a period of dangerous global warming.”

PrIMAVeRa, another affected project, is modelling antimicrobial resistance, which a spokesperson said was “a well-known problem in countries of the former Soviet Union, not least in Russia”, with “major risk of spillover”.

The project was collaborating with the Pasteur Institute of Saint Petersburg to get access to patient data from Russia, but it has now been forced to end that collaboration.

Not all the projects mired in uncertainty fear the worst. NDC Aspects, a project on climate mitigation with two Russian partners, said it was not expecting major consequences.

MEP asks universities to join forces on academic freedom

Christian Ehler warns of threats to European society and democracy, promising action from the European Parliament

Craig Nicholson in Leiden

A leading member of the European Parliament’s research committee has called on universities to back initiatives defending academic freedom, warning that free inquiry and even democracy itself are at risk.

MEP Christian Ehler sounded the alarm at an event to mark the 20th anniversary of the League of European Research Universities on 19 May. He said the Parliament was “painfully aware” that academic freedom was “under threat in Europe”.

The Parliament is going to push for protection of academic freedom to be enshrined in EU treaties, Ehler said. “You have to fight for that together with us,” he told the university rectors and other academic leaders assembled at the opening day of the event in Leiden, the Netherlands.

Ehler said that the Parliament was working on “a proper toolbox for enforcement” and that it was aiming to hold a conference at the end of the year at which it would present “a monitor of the Parliament on academic freedom”.

But here, too, he called for universities’ assistance, saying he would “hesitate” to say that “even well-meaning” political institutions like the Parliament should themselves monitor academic freedom.

“We need your leadership,” he said. “We’re in a complicated, interesting, challenging dialogue with Europe and university organisations [on] how we can do that [monitoring], how we can use the strong voice of institutions but still not make academic freedom dependent on these institutions. And that’s a delicate balance which we have to work on.”

FOCUS ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

From AI to PI

Funders are already using artificial intelligence to aid peer review, but how far is too far?

Robin Bisson

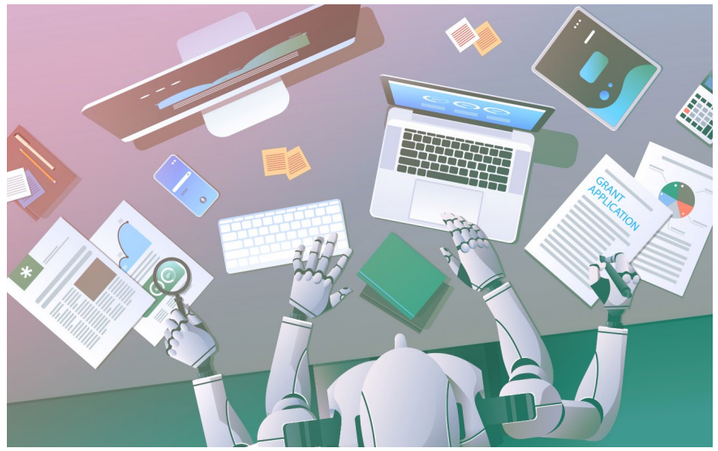
It is a truth universally acknowledged that the peer review process of awarding research grants is imperfect and inefficient but also currently the best system available.

The sheer amount of human effort that goes into reviewing grant applications means that, for many research funding organisations, there is an incentive to experiment with this cornerstone of academic research.

As with many other process-heavy parts of life, some funders are beginning to wonder whether artificial intelligence and machine learning could streamline their systems. But exactly how AI could—or should—be used by funders is an open question.

While some AI is already in use to assist with the doling out of money to researchers, concerns are already being aired that this use might lead to not just imperfect but incomprehensible systems.

"Everybody talks about artificial intelligence, but once it comes to the specifics it's less clear what it can do for you," says David Krasa of the European Research Council Executive Agency.



Reviewer selection

When it comes to searching for experts, though, the ERC has found out what AI can do for it. Krasa has overseen a project where an AI system is used to identify external grant reviewers.

As the keystone funder of the EU's vast Horizon Europe R&D programme, the ERC receives thousands of proposals to each call. Applications are initially whittled down by members of its 27 peer review panels, covering all areas of scientific research. These panel members are generalists in their area, Krasa explains, who then identify specialist external reviewers to review each proposal that makes it past the initial panel evaluation.

"For the specific problem of identifying external reviewers, many panel members told us that sometimes they were running out of ideas," Krasa explains.

In 2018, the ERC piloted an AI system, developed by Dutch company Prophy, that panel members could use to help identify potential external reviewers.

The AI system used in the pilot project relies on data mining around 100 million academic publications, from which it identifies around 100,000 unique 'scientific concepts' which it links to the authors of papers who may be candidates to become external reviewers.

When the system was applied to past proposals that had been made to the ERC, there was a convincing overlap between the AI-generated suggestions for external reviewers and those that had come from humans. In 2020 the ERC started using the AI system more widely.

The panel members have been enthusiastic, Krasa says, with members of the panel on computer sciences asking if they can use the system to identify reviewers for journal articles.

"This kind of feedback from somebody from computer sciences tells us probably we are getting something right," Krasa says.

Handle with care

Not everyone has been positive, though. For example, some panel members are concerned that AI is a black box that could introduce biases. There are widespread concerns both inside and outside of academia that AI can end up adopting the race and gender biases held by humans and reproduce discrimination in automated processes.

Krasa acknowledges such concerns are reasonable, and points out that no one is obliged to use the system.

"We are aware that AI can have all kinds of biases," Krasa says. "In most areas, the system does not give you 50 per cent female and 50 per cent male reviewers, simply because there are way more publications in certain scientific areas by male researchers."

With this in mind, Krasa says that members of the ERC's peer review panels are advised to use the system with care.

Nonetheless, having concluded that AI works, the ERC is now looking at using it to help identify future panel members. The funder is also running a pilot on text mining PhD certificates to save time on checking eligibility criteria for calls.

Deeper integration

Some other not-for-profit foundations are looking to take things a step further and integrate AI more deeply into their processes.

The Novo Nordisk Foundation, a Danish funder that focuses on medical research, has been experimenting with using AI for various purposes, including helping to shortlist research proposals.

"One of our experiments is to see if we could develop a machine which in the future could help select the right proposals, or at least exclude those where we are 99 per cent sure that they do not meet the criteria," says Thomas Alslev Christensen, senior vice president for impact at the foundation.

Christensen says that reviewers "could have a pre-read of the applications using machine learning", which would "ease the process" of having to look through all applications.

However, handing AI a share of the responsibility in assessing applications for funding is not without risks, Christensen believes. He points out that an AI system might miss high-risk, high-reward projects.

"We can only use it as a supplementary instrument and not be totally dependent on it," he cautions. "Artificial intelligence can support decision-making and can make it more efficient. It cannot replace the traditional peer review process."

Ceding control

For some researchers, using AI to cut down parts of the decision-making process is not a risk worth taking with people's careers.

Jon Crowcroft, a researcher at the Alan Turing Institute, the UK's national institute for data science and AI, believes that using AI to judge individuals "could be ethically extremely challenging".

He warns that the use of AI to assess applications is "liable to get gamed very cleverly by some people", as researchers could identify keywords that would make their application more likely to be selected. "I think it's really, really high risk."

Even the idea of using AI to speed up processes comes with risks, Crowcroft warns, because of the human propensity for laziness.

If a human-level check is all that is required after an AI system has done the legwork, then "most people won't be as careful at checking", he suggests.

"That has a negative effect, because it reduces the breadth of training of people to assess research. It would be ludicrous to put a machine learning algorithm in and then leave the human to rubber-stamp."

Future uses

However, Crowcroft believes that using AI to data-mine publications and suggest grant reviewers is an "entirely reasonable" implementation of the technology.

Moreover, he suggests that individual researchers themselves could use AI that has been trained on publication data to help them decide whether to write a funding proposal in the first place. AI's ability to find matching work across the vast landscape of published research could help researchers get a feel for the novelty and importance of an idea.

"People should be only writing grant proposals every now and then, and having a high chance of getting them, so there would be less interruption to doing the actual work," Crowcroft says. Used in this way, AI would also help reduce the high volume of applications received by funders.

Another potential use for AI in grant administration would be to analyse data on reviewers themselves. This could help with the problem of proposals being rejected on the basis of one negative review that may or may not be fair.

It would be possible to build up data about reviewers using automation, Crowcroft says, but adds that many funders are "very wary" of using such data.

"If a reviewer kills a really good proposal [unfairly], you could find that out if you had this kind of process," he says, suggesting that such a use of AI could make headway in tackling this widely recognised problem with peer review. "I think if you put in place a system, and you did it right, you might find it will get somewhat embraced as fixing some of the current problems."

While there are no perfect solutions to handing out grants, the best imperfect system available is being given a run for its money.

> "It would be ludicrous to put a machine learning algorithm in and then leave the human to rubber-stamp."
>
> **Jon Crowcroft**, a researcher at the Alan Turing Institute in the UK

*AI in the EU

Leading the world on artificial intelligence development is a big priority for the EU, and AI features prominently in its ambition to make sure that Europe is "fit for the digital age".

Earlier this month, the European Parliament adopted a report by a special parliamentary committee on AI that called for more EU investment to be pumped into AI research. The report suggested that the EU has "fallen behind" on technology development, and urged the EU to "not always regulate AI as a technology".

The report will feed into the parliament's work on a proposed AI Act, which would split AI into three categories on the basis of the risk to privacy and data safety posed by an application. The act will be voted on by two committees in September.

FOCUS INTERVIEW

Culture switch

Karen Stroobants talks about her role in pushing for positive change in research culture

Robin Bisson

Five years ago, Karen Stroobants abandoned the chemistry lab at the University of Cambridge and set about trying to reform research culture. "I realised I preferred working with people over working with samples, and I had concerns about how some people in the research environment behaved to one another," she recalls, saying she had also reached a ceiling of support for professional development.

Stroobants switched to a career in research policy and has become one of the key players behind a pan-European agreement on research culture that could have major consequences for research careers. "I come with a perspective where I have been an active researcher, but also have experienced how things are done in other sectors, having made that career transition from academia into the policy sector," she tells Research Europe.

The research consultant has been tasked with helping to draft the European Commission agreement on reforming research assessment, which is expected to launch later this year. More than 300 organisations are feeding their thoughts into the process, along with EU member states. The agreement is expected to help tackle long-standing problems with research culture that flow from using narrow, publication-based metrics to assess research, such as the practice of sticking early career researchers on short-term contracts that may prevent them from planning their lives.

Stroobants is the only individual expert to be appointed to the drafting team, the other members of which are drawn from the Commission, the European University Association and Science Europe, an association of research organisations.

"They [the Commission] felt like it would be really useful to have someone involved who could bring an early career perspective as well as insights from working on research assessment alongside some of the established organisations," she says.

IMAGE: GABRIELLA BOCCHETTI, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Potential for change

Stroobants' own experience of switching career taught her that recruitment, hiring and performance reviews are often very different outside universities. She suggests that by reforming how research is assessed, the sector could "move a bit closer to methods in other sectors to enable some of that mobility in and out of academia".

But her own views on reforming research assessment come second to her role in drafting the agreement. With so many organisations involved, the task is far from trivial, and the drafting team are carefully scrutinising hundreds of comments and amendments. Stroobants says there is overall agreement on the need to take a broader view of how contributions to research are recognised, "but maybe there are differences in how far people want to go".

While she takes the view that the environment in which researchers are shaped could be included as an element of assessment, "that's maybe a step further than some people are thinking about, in terms of what it means to consider broader contributions".

Sector shifts

Stroobants' motivation to push for change in research assessment comes, in part, from work she did while at the UK's Royal Society. She was instrumental in developing a narrative CV for researchers, which helps them highlight their contributions to research in a consistent way, even when their career paths have taken a few twists and turns. That style has since been recommended by the UK government and introduced by the national funding agency, UK Research and Innovation.

By looking at areas including research integrity, career development and equality, diversity and inclusion, "we arrived at the conclusion that assessment is a lever that's really at the centre of a lot of areas where there are issues in research—issues with mental health, for example", she explains.

Those are lessons Stroobants has taken into her role on the drafting team—but looking at what is ahead, she wants to go further. "This is an opportunity, not just to change assessment, but to really think about how we can rethink assessment practices so that they have a positive impact on all those other areas that they link to," she says.

"An important output alongside the research itself are the researchers, and the way their time as a researcher shapes those people and prepares them for whatever professional career they go into."

> "We arrived at the conclusion that assessment is a lever that's really at the centre of a lot of issues in research."
>
> Research consultant **Karen Stroobants**

COMMENT | Crisis response

A call to action

Science in Exile Declaration sets out steps to help researchers in times of crisis

Peter Gluckman is president of the International Science Council. **Vivi Stavrou** is senior science officer at the ISC and executive secretary of the council's Committee for Freedom and Responsibility in Science

Research by the Young Scientists Council of Ukraine, published on 4 April, found that 6,300 Ukrainian scientists fled the country in the 19 days following the Russian invasion. Over the same period, 82 scientific institutions, amounting to nearly 15 per cent of research infrastructure, had sustained significant—and often deliberate—damage.

All these figures will now be much higher. Of the refugees, one in five will likely stay abroad for good. Thousands remain in Ukraine to support the civil administration and their families. Some have been killed. Others are missing. The majority are internally displaced.

The war in Ukraine is a stark reminder of why the scientific community must stand together to condemn such acts of aggression and, more importantly, step up to take action before, during and after such disasters. There are numerous ongoing conflicts around the globe, and more refugees than at any time in recorded history.

This is why the International Science Council, World Academy of Sciences and InterAcademy Partnership have come together to develop the Science in Exile initiative. This network brings the science community together with at-risk, displaced and refugee scientists, as well as the non-governmental organisations and UN agencies working to protect and support them.

Science in Exile exists to support these NGOs and agencies, not duplicate their work or compete for funding. The aim is to exchange information, identify gaps, and assist the global scientific community in protecting and supporting scientists put at risk or displaced by conflicts or other disasters. It is to raise awareness and consider how science and scientists should prepare for and respond to such crises. It is to bring the broader scientific enterprise to the table, and to provide evidence to support response efforts.

Declaration of support

On 20 April, we launched the Science in Exile Declaration, which is now collecting signatories—we urge institutions, disciplinary associations and other organisations to sign up. The declaration speaks to a desire for a world with peace, security and wellbeing, where science can flourish and enhance people's lives. It provides a vision for collective action and a framework to allow at-risk, displaced and refugee scientists to continue their research.

The declaration sets out six Articles of Commitment. The first deals with preparedness: the need for organisations and national and international governing bodies to make plans for protecting and preserving scientific knowledge, systems and infrastructure in times of disaster and conflict. This takes dedicated funding, commitment from stakeholders and innovative thinking about the physical structures and safety mechanisms needed to warn, protect and respond to scientists' needs and work during a crisis.

Articles two through four consider how to provide support in times of crisis, such as through fellowships and scholarships, pathways for continuing work and study, and helping at-risk, displaced and refugee scientists to advocate for their needs.

We have seen an outpouring of support for Ukraine, with universities offering places for students, fellowships for professors and positions for scientists. Yet huge gaps remain.

Ukraine's request to the international scientific community is clear: to fund research networks; to hire academics, technical staff and workers at risk; and to engage with the country's authorities. The Young Scientists Council has asked for help to provide open access to journals, research databases, archives and online libraries; remote access to licensed software, research equipment and laboratories; and the waiving of publication charges.

These are the kind of issues that Science in Exile will focus on. The network needs to harness the current support for Ukraine to push for fairer and more humane systems and policies overall.

The declaration's last two articles address what happens after a crisis, focusing on reconstruction and protecting future generations. On average, refugees are displaced for 20 years. Their educations are disrupted and careers fragmented. How will societies rebuild and thrive after a war or disaster if there are no scientists, doctors, engineers and other scholars?

We need to further explore how science recovers from catastrophe, recognising that the path to peace and security may be long and complicated.

Let us mobilise, using the declaration to advocate support for scientists, science systems and scientific infrastructure, and draw up plans for recovery from crises such as those in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Venezuela and Myanmar. Funders and governments should sponsor these efforts, and challenge the scientific and academic communities to propose ways forward.

> "We have seen an outpouring of support for Ukraine, with universities offering places for students, fellowships, and positions for scientists. Yet huge gaps remain."

Comment | Digital infrastructure

Level the playing field

Policymakers need to rethink their funding approach to non-commercial projects

Benedikt Fecher heads the Knowledge and Society programme at the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society in Berlin, Germany

The 2002 Budapest Open Access Initiative envisaged restructuring access to scientific research, with the help of the internet. This would accelerate scientific progress, lessen the power of commercial publishers and help academics regain autonomy over their infrastructure in light of the rocketing cost of scholarly journals.

Twenty years on, the number of open-access papers, journals and preprints has increased, yet the promised autonomy over the infrastructure of scholarly communication has not materialised. In fact, the dependence on commercial players has reproduced itself in the digital realm.

Digital tools have become indispensable in researchers' everyday lives; they help in searching and summarising the literature, storing and commenting on data, communicating science with external stakeholders and tracking post-publication impact.

This "platformisation" occurs at every stage of research. Most of these tools and services are commercially owned, and many have been developed or bought by the major publishers. The 20th-anniversary recommendations from the Budapest initiative reflect the concerns around this trend, and its likely acceleration.

There are alternatives: academic-led initiatives such as the search engine BASE, the discovery tool Open Knowledge Maps, the Crossref agency that administers Digital Object Identifiers and many community-driven repositories serving particular places or disciplines.

Researchers surely want a strong presence for such open, non-commercial, diverse infrastructures. We would like to avoid lock-in and domination by commercial entities and preserve genuinely open services and the more niche infrastructures that are sustained by academic, rather than commercial logic.

For a study published last year, my colleagues and I compared 33 commercial and non-commercial services at various points on the research lifecycle. Almost all aim to make research more transparent, inclusive, accessible and effective.

We found that publicly funded infrastructures are at a disadvantage, largely due to the way they are funded. There are three main reasons for this.

Rigid funding logics

Research infrastructures today are mainly software projects. Software production is constantly adapting to user needs, whereas public funding for research infrastructure is usually linear and rigid. Every change in a project is a laborious bureaucratic act.

That means an idea from, say, 2018 gets a funding decision in 2019; after a short user survey, it is implemented as proposed. The result is a software product in 2022 that is obsolete on arrival.

Under-resourced teams

Compared with commercial services, public and non-commercial efforts usually have fewer programmers and sales personnel and a larger proportion of researchers. This hinders their ability to understand and respond to users' demands.

A lack of career opportunities in science for highly qualified non-scientific personnel compounds the problem. Why work for a publicly funded infrastructure project if you do not get credit for it and can earn twice as much in private industry?

Misguided funding

Public funding often supports new services instead of sustaining those that are already operating successfully. At best, new initiatives are expected to have developed a business model by the end of the funding period. This is almost cynical, considering projects often fulfil niche needs that cannot be monetised. Many of these initiatives stop as soon as the money runs out. Infrastructure work is not sexy, but it is necessary for science to function.

This helps to explain why public and non-commercial scholar-led infrastructures seem to have a hard time succeeding, and why the successful non-commercial efforts mentioned above are the exception. Policymakers need to rethink their approach: there is a danger that short-sighted policy will result in science in the digital age becoming neoliberal rather than open.

We need to level the playing field, providing scholar-led and open projects with more sustainable funding and ways of working, and regulating commercial products to ensure open values and avoid lock-in.

Initiatives such as Invest in Open, Global Sustainability Coalition for Open Science Services, and OpenAIRE, among others, are important advocates for open values in tomorrow's science infrastructure.

One way to achieve this might be to consider infrastructure as universities' fourth mission, alongside teaching, research and knowledge transfer. With better funding and training in coding, librarians would be well suited to fulfil this role.

> "An idea from 2018, say, gets a funding decision in 2019; then it is implemented as proposed. The result is a software product in 2022 that is obsolete on arrival."

Comment | Research assessment

The metric tide rises again

Looking again at metrics can drive a radical overhaul of research assessment

Stephen Curry is professor of structural biology and assistant provost for equality, diversity and inclusion at Imperial College London, England. **Elizabeth Gadd** is research policy manager at Loughborough University, England. **James Wilsdon** is Digital Science professor of research policy at the University of Sheffield, England

As we digest recent headlines from the UK's latest massive exercise assessing the quality of its universities' research, attention is turning to the scope and design of the next assessment cycle. As in 2008 and 2014, the possibility of a simpler, cheaper exercise that draws on readily available metrics is being floated as an alternative to a process that is widely agreed to have become overly cumbersome.

Anyone under 60 who works in UK universities is part of a system shaped by successive waves of national research assessment, dating back to 1986. Over eight cycles, this has become a highly complex evaluation machine, admired as a fair and accountable basis on which to determine the annual allocation of about £2 billion (€2.3bn) of quality-related (QR) funding, but also contested, as a source of bureaucracy, competition and conformity.

So it is right that the designers and users of the current Research Excellence Framework (REF) assessment exercise remain alert to the potential for enhancing its operations. Advances in ICT, data science, scientometrics and related fields have transformed the possibilities and practices of measurement and management, and research assessment has advanced alongside this.

Over the decades, the culture and management of UK university research has become so deeply fused with the machinery of assessment that it makes reform difficult. Viewed from afar, unpicking the whole thing can seem simple; up close, all you see is a spaghetti of interdependencies.

That said, various factors are now aligning to support a more radical overhaul of the exercise than at any point in recent years.

Simplify and improve

Public R&D spending in the UK is set to grow through to 2025. There is the potential for more strategic integration between QR and other funding through the structures of the UK research-funding body UK Research and Innovation, and heightened urgency around research culture, impact, diversity and inclusion. And there is a strong drive to reduce bureaucracy, through an ongoing independent review and UKRI's initiative for Simpler and Better funding.

So the time is right to look at how to simplify and improve the REF. The Future Research Assessment Programme (Frap), which the research funding bodies initiated in 2020, is admirable in its scope and intent. Multiple strands of evaluation and analysis are now underway.

As the latest addition to this mixture, UKRI's Research England agency has asked us to lead an updated review of the role of metrics in the UK research assessment system.

Between now and September, The Metric Tide Revisited will take a short, sharp, evidence-informed look at current and potential uses of metrics, with four objectives:

- To revisit the conclusions and recommendations of the 2015 Metric Tide review and assess progress against these.
- To consider whether developments in the infrastructures, methodologies and uses of research metrics negate or change any of those 2015 conclusions, or suggest additional priorities.
- To consider the role of metrics in the REF and whether design changes under review by the Frap suggest similar or different conclusions to those reached in 2015.
- To offer advice to UKRI and the higher education funding bodies on the most effective ways of supporting responsible research assessment and use of metrics.

The original Metric Tide was underpinned by extensive evidence-gathering and consultation, and there's no need to repeat all of this from scratch. There's also been welcome progress on these agendas since 2015, driven by the Declaration on Research Assessment and other international initiatives, and with institutions adopting their own policies for responsible metrics and assessment.

We will hold roundtables in June and July to invite input. We want to hear from researchers across disciplines and career stages; scientometricians; metrics providers; university leaders and research managers; publishers; librarians; learned societies; research funders; and infrastructure providers. We will also work with the Forum for Responsible Research Metrics—created as a recommendation of The Metric Tide—as a source of informal oversight.

We want to improve research cultures and deliver the evidence and answers that the Frap and wider community need. We know how vital it is to get assessment systems right; how the priorities of the REF need to be weighed alongside technologies, methods and applications; and how any proposed reforms must engage with users' experiences and insights, and stakeholders' expectations.

The various strands of the Frap will be drawn together in the autumn. It will then be up to ministers to decide how radical they want to be. We are quietly optimistic for positive change.

> "Between now and September, The Metric Tide Revisited will take a short, sharp, evidence-informed look at current and potential uses of metrics."

NATIONS

France | Germany | Italy | Netherlands

German rectors fear funding boost U-turn

A coalition agreement to strengthen studies and teaching is at risk of being cancelled, universities warn

Hristio Boytchev in Berlin

German University heads have expressed concern that an annual funding increase promised to universities before the general election last year may not be implemented—and may even be replaced with cuts.

In a statement earlier this month, the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) voiced its fears for the future contract to strengthen studies and teaching that was put forward in the coalition agreement. Despite political tensions in Germany and abroad, there must be no delays in implementing this agreement, said Peter-André Alt, the group's president.

Alt spoke to education minister Bettina Stark-Watzinger at the HRK's annual conference this month, urging her to make the first moves to increase university funding this year—regardless of budget uncertainties.

"In order to make a sustainable contribution to innovation and progress, we need the annual increases that have been promised," said Alt. "Investment in higher education is investment in the future viability of our society."

The government's 2022 budget proposal, which should come into effect in September, is worth around €457 billion in pure spending—€115bn less than in 2021—and €50bn in investments. But no detail has yet emerged as to how that budget will be split between different government departments.

Alt specifically referred to extra funding to help universities digitalise, an area in which Germany lags behind comparable countries. "Universities have successfully tested new teaching formats under the conditions of the pandemic, but additional funds are now urgently needed to develop these," he said.

Alt said that a failure to put the extra funds forward in this year's budget—or even the possibility of introducing cuts—would mean that opportunities to improve university teaching would be missed. "That would be shameful and would set us back in international competition."

In a separate statement, the HRK acknowledged the importance of science communication for higher education institutions. It said that university administrations should take a more decisive role in planning and organising science communication activities.

The scientific community should also find better ways to appreciate science communication as part of scientific achievement, the HRK said. It suggested that academic appointment procedures should include science communication as a criterion.

Furthermore, universities should open up to forms of communication that go beyond scientific journals and specialist publications to reach a wider audience, the HRK added. However, it said that academics should not be "overburdened" with such duties, especially those at earlier career stages.

> "This would be shameful and would set us back in international competition."
>
> HRK president **Peter-André Alt**

French research consortium signs Wiley open-access deal

Couperin-Wiley agreement will "transition groundbreaking research from across France to immediate open access"

Jason Walsh in Paris

Researchers in France are to have free access to 1,400 hybrid journals following the completion of a deal between publisher Wiley and the Couperin consortium, a collective representing most major French higher education and research institutions.

The agreement—the first on such a scale to be signed by Couperin—will grant researchers at member institutions access to all of Wiley's hybrid and subscription journals. Researchers will be able to publish accepted articles open access in all of Wiley's 1,400 hybrid journals, and articles will also be deposited in the national research paper archive Hal.

Under the terms of the agreement, individual institutions may additionally offer to authors the right to open-access publishing in "fully gold" journals, meaning their articles will be fully open access on the journal website rather than only in the Hal archive.

Describing the agreement as one that "will transition groundbreaking research from across France to immediate open access and enable the world to benefit from its discoveries", Wiley said in a statement that the result would be the publication of more than 2,700 open-access articles from authors affiliated with French institutions each year.

"We're excited to join Couperin in making more peer-reviewed research open access, in the process accelerating academic discovery and showcasing the work of France's dedicated researchers on the global stage," said Liz Ferguson, senior vice-president at Wiley Research Publishing.

Italy's promotion process sparks protest

Evaluator blows whistle on perceived "nepotism and parochial interests" in researcher evaluation

Fabio Turone in Milan

The complex procedure introduced in 2010 by the 'Gelmini reform' to vet the credentials of Italian academics in search of promotion, called the Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale, is again at the centre of a controversy.

Michele Ciavarella, a member of an evaluation commission for the procedure, has complained about the behaviour of other members and announced his willingness to resign in protest.

Ciavarella, a professor of mechanical engineering at Politecnico di Bari, circulated an open letter on social media in which he wrote that he would not accept decisions taken by the majority of the commission that he said were "on the edge of nepotism and parochial interests, or beyond the edge".

The Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale is managed by the evaluation agency Anvur through public calls for evaluators. These evaluators are drawn randomly from volunteers who meet certain requirements and are then assigned to commissions charged with evaluating—for each discipline—which academics are fit to apply to subsequent concorsi, or public calls for teaching positions in local universities.

Since its first round in 2012-14, the system has proved to be vulnerable to abuse. In recent years, the prevalence of nepotism and parochial interests has been the subject of several scandals, some of which have involved court cases.

Universities and research minister Maria Cristina Messa has said repeatedly in recent months that the habilitation procedure needs to be reformed and simplified, particularly when it comes to defining scientific disciplines. There are currently 380 of these, each with its own small evaluation commission.

Attractive role

Working in the commission requires a huge amount of unpaid work but is seen as attractive by some because of the discretion and power associated with it.

"I had already expressed disagreement with the previous round of candidates, by writing minority reports," Ciavarella told Research Professional News. "Then I decided I had to protest more strongly against decisions that not only gave the habilitation to candidates with very modest accomplishments, but also denied it to researchers with an excellent track record, in order to reduce potential competitors in the subsequent concorsi."

The usual loophole, he claimed, involves declaring that the highly qualified candidate does not really belong to the specific disciplinary niche.

The current system is unpredictable, he claimed, adding that it has contributed to it becoming almost impossible for foreign academics to consider applying for a post in Italy.

> "[Decisions are] on the edge of nepotism and parochial interests, or beyond the edge."
>
> **Michele Ciavarella** protests against the vetting process for academics seeking promotion

News in brief

Dutch staff to get 4% pay rise

Trade unions in the Netherlands and the UNL association of Dutch universities have agreed on a 4 per cent wage increase for all university employees from 1 July 2022. The increase is part of a settlement on the Collective Labour Agreement for Dutch Universities 2022-23, and runs from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023. The deal, which covers 57,000 staff, also includes a one-off lump-sum payment, as well as improvements to academic parental leave.

Full story

Italian PhDs struggle to pay bills

Most PhD candidates in Italy find it hard to make ends meet and will continue to do so, a survey has indicated, even after an increase in minimum bursaries—approved by the research ministry—comes into effect in July. The ADI association surveyed more than 5,000 PhD students, the majority of whom said that they were living on the minimum bursary of €1,100 per month, which was barely enough for basic needs.

Full story

Dutch 'champs in collaboration'

Science minister Robbert Dijkgraaf has praised Dutch researchers' attitude to collaboration with international colleagues, saying it is a true strength of the nation. "I like to say that the Netherlands is world champion in collaboration," he told a meeting in Brussels last week. Connections abroad are a strength of the Dutch system, as shown in the number of researchers who are partners on internationally authored research papers, he said.

Full story

Nordics

Norwegian research council board fired

Move comes after research minister orders "clean up" of council's dire finances

Margaux Lisaerde in Copenhagen

The Norwegian government has replaced the board of the country's research council—the Forskningsrådet—as part of an effort to restore the organisation's finances after huge predicted losses.

The Forskningsrådet admitted this month that it would be about 275 million Norwegian kroner (€26.5m) in the red by the end of this year.

The government said that the council's planned outgoings over the coming years were far higher than its predicted budget.

At the end of 2023, the Forskningsrådet is likely to have lost about NKr1.9bn, which is currently expected to increase to NKr2.9bn by the end of 2024, according to the minister of research and higher education Ola Borten Moe.

New leadership

"In order to clean up, there is a need for new and different competences in the research council's board," the government said in a statement after confirming that the Forskningsrådet's board had been dismissed.

"The financial problems will only get bigger if we don't act now," said Borten Moe.

"There has been promised more money than the research council has in the future, and we must clean it up."

In a joint statement to the newspaper Aftenposten, the outgoing board declared that it believed its financial management was good and justifiable. It said that a recent audit by Norway's Office of the Auditor General confirmed this.

Norway's former finance minister, Kristin Halvorsen, will chair a temporary board, the government confirmed.

Halvorsen currently directs the Center for International Climate and Environmental Research in Oslo. She will be joined by Robert Rastad, the head of the University of Bergen, who has been appointed as deputy head of the interim board. Together with the ministry, they will look into how the financial challenges could be resolved, while limiting the negative effects of remedial actions taken.

"It is important for the new board to work out good proposals for solutions that the government can decide on," Halvorsen said. "I understand that the financial situation can cause unrest in research environments, and therefore it is important that we get this cleaned up in a proper way."

Funding freezes

The government wants the new board to oversee an external audit of the research council's finances. For the time being, the Forskningsrådet has been instructed to stop allocations for new projects in areas that are likely to find themselves with reduced budgets.

For this reason, the Forskerforbundet, the Norwegian association of researchers, has expressed concern about potential funding freezes.

"The allocation percentage from the Forskningsrådet is already low, and an enormous amount of work has been put into applications for this year's calls," said Forskerforbundet president Guro Elisabeth Lind.

Borten Moe said he wanted to limit the consequences for R&D, but that some impact would be felt regardless.

"It is unfortunate for the many talented researchers we have in Norway that we have ended up in this situation," he said.

> "The financial problems will only get bigger if we don't act now."
>
> Norway's research and higher education minister **Ola Borten Moe**

News in brief

More interdisciplinarity urged

Denmark should put in place structures and tools to support interdisciplinary research, an advisory group has urged. The Danish Council for Research and Innovation Policy, which advises the research ministry, said addressing an issue from multiple perspectives provides better solutions with fewer blind spots, which is crucial for the green transition. It said research institutions should be assisted to adjust their single-disciplinary structures.

Full story

Accreditation to be reviewed

The Norwegian government has announced that it will set up an expert group to review the requirements for higher education institutions to become fully fledged universities. To become a university in Norway at present, an institution must have at least four separate doctoral programmes. "It is time for a review to see if the current system is unnecessarily bureaucratic and if there are too rigid requirements," said higher education minister Ola Borten Moe.

Full story

'Ghost authoring' in spotlight

Denmark's Aarhus University has said it will support early career researchers if they fall victim to so-called ghost authoring, whereby senior researchers take credit for papers to which they have contributed little or nothing. The statement was a response to the #pleasedontstealmywork campaign by Maria Toft, a University of Copenhagen PhD student, who collected 120 testimonials from young researchers about unjustified co-authorship.

Full story

UK & Ireland

UK research excellence surges forward

Increase in high-quality research shown in latest huge assessment exercise raises prospect of funding changes

Research Professional News team

Universities across the UK scored significantly better in the 2021 Research Excellence Framework than in the previous iteration of the country's huge assessment of institutions' research quality, leading to calls for more money to reward this excellence, alongside questions about grade inflation.

Around £2 billion (€2.3bn) a year of so-called quality-related funding is currently routed to UK universities based on their performance, with the formula differing in each of the four nations: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Some 41 per cent of overall submissions to REF 2021 were considered world-leading (graded 4*, the top mark available), compared with 30 per cent in the last such exercise back in 2014.

For outputs, the highest grade was given to 36 per cent in 2021 versus 22 per cent in 2014 and 14 per cent in 2008—although the exercises were run differently in these years, so the results are not directly comparable.

Excellence was found across the UK, with more of it outside the traditional research stronghold of the 'golden triangle' of London-Oxford-Cambridge than in previous exercises.

"Those in our big research institutions have continued to do well, but we have succeeded in capturing a broader range of research that we didn't capture before," said David Sweeney, head of the funding body Research England.

Funding distribution

The scale and spread of excellence means that the government and its research councils are likely to re-examine how the REF results feed into the distribution of funding.

Sweeney said the formula in England could change to reflect the increase in the amount of top-ranked research found in this latest REF. Kim Hackett, REF director at Research England, also said that there was "a different picture" in this REF that would "therefore feed into funding accordingly".

Hackett said there was "an open approach to thinking about what we need to look at next time" when it came to the rating scale.

Some commentators questioned the value of the 4* rating, considering how much research was given this top grade in the latest REF.

But James Wilsdon, a professor of research policy at the University of Sheffield, downplayed fears of grade inflation in the REF.

"If you set up an assessment system where all the resources go to 3* and 4* then it's not surprising that 80-plus per cent ends up in those two categories," he said.

Changes to REF methodologies and the growth of the researcher population involved between 2014 and 2021 also make comparing the two exercises difficult.

Meanwhile, Tim Bradshaw, chief executive of the Russell Group of research-intensive universities, warned that the value of quality-related research funding had "declined in real terms over the past decade".

But Sweeney said he was optimistic that allocations for English universities would "go up a bit", although Research England is yet to be given its budget for quality-related funding for the year.

Read more on REF 2021 from Research Professional News

> "We have succeeded in capturing a broader range of research than before."
>
> **David Sweeney**, executive chair of Research England

News in brief

€300m funding boost for Ireland

An extra €307 million will be spent this year on higher education in Ireland, on top of the existing €2 billion annual budget, the Irish government has announced. It said the extra funding would focus on "improving the quality of programmes, their outcomes, and providing a third-level education system which is accessible to everyone in society". This followed the publication of a policy document on higher education called Funding the Future.

Full story

Irish technical university opens

A technological university for Ireland's south-eastern region was formally established on 1 May. The South East Technological University is the result of the dissolution and merger of Waterford and Carlow Institutes of Technology. The university will host more than 18,000 students and about 1,500 staff. Its campuses are spread across Ireland's south-east in Wicklow, Wexford, Carlow, Kilkenny and Waterford.

Full story

Data hub announced for Ulster

The UK government has announced that it will open a £50 million data innovation hub to support businesses in developing, testing and adopting data-driven technologies. The Smart Manufacturing Data Hub will be led by Ulster University in Northern Ireland and will help small and medium manufacturers to make better use of their data. The hub is backed by £20m in government funds and £30m of business co-investment.

Full story

US

‘Stagnant’ R&D spending sparks concerns

Report from American Association for the Advancement of Science underscores threat of competition from China

Lindsay McKenzie in Washington DC

The US’s global position in research and innovation “remains strong” for now but is under threat from “stagnant” public investments, the American Association for the Advancement of Science has warned.

Other countries, in particular China, are placing the US under increasing pressure, the AAAS warned in a report this month by authors Matt Hourihan and Alessandra Zimmermann.

Looking at OECD data since 1992, the authors found that the US ranked either first or second in the world, in terms of absolute numbers, for R&D expenditure, scientific publications, researchers and global patents. But when the scale of the US economy was taken into account, a different picture emerged.

The authors calculated that the US came sixth globally in terms of R&D intensity (spending as a proportion of GDP), 10th in basic science intensity and 17th in the proportion of researchers relative to the overall labour force.

China’s R&D spending has grown at four times the US rate over the past 20 years, the authors stressed. Countries such as South Korea, Germany and Taiwan are also upping their research investments and achieving high rankings in R&D and researcher intensity.

“The US has long led the world in R&D spending, but China has gained rapidly in recent years,” the report says.

“Since 2000, Chinese R&D investment from public and private sources increased by 14.2 per cent a year on average, an astounding growth rate nearly double that achieved by Korea and over four times that of the US.”

The US does a good job of turning investments in research into commercial products, but China has “well surpassed US influence in the physical sciences and engineering fields, and is gaining in the life sciences, an area of traditional US dominance”, the report notes.

The US has just over 1.5 million full-time researchers, while China has over two million. The US does, however, continue to award the most science and engineering doctoral degrees, according to the latest available data from the National Science Foundation, the authors say.

The US awarded 41,071 science and engineering doctorates in 2018, whereas China produced 39,768 doctoral graduates and India 26,890.

The House version of the bipartisan innovation act currently being negotiated by a bicameral conference proposes lifting the US cap on the number of doctoral students from overseas who can come and study in the country. This could help the US to increase its researcher intensity, said congressman Bill Foster, who attended a webinar on the report in his capacity as co-chair of the Congressional Research and Development Caucus.

Ultimately, the US is not in a bad position in terms of R&D leadership, Hourihan said at the online event on the report, organised by the Task Force on American Innovation and the Congressional Research and Development Caucus. But he warned that the country’s global leadership in research and innovation could slip if policymakers did not take a proactive approach to investment.

Several OECD countries have let their R&D investment stagnate since the recent financial crisis, Hourihan said during the webinar, but he added that “that stagnation has been a bit more egregious” in the US.

> “Chinese R&D investment has increased at a rate over four times that of the US.”
>
> AAAS report authors **Matt Hourihan** and **Alessandra Zimmermann**

News in brief

Talks begin on innovation act

A bicameral committee of Congress has finally started negotiating the bipartisan Innovation and Competition Act, which could provide billions of dollars for R&D. If the committee successfully merges the competing priorities of Senate and House versions, the legislation could drastically increase funding for the National Science Foundation, including through millions for the recently established Directorate for Technology, Innovation and Partnerships.

Full story

US debates Russian visa change

President Joe Biden has asked Congress to amend the Immigration and Nationality Act to make it easier for Russian scientists to work in the US. His request formed part of the White House’s supplemental Ukraine budget proposal. The amendment would enable Russians with a master’s or doctoral degree in science, technology, engineering or mathematics to obtain a US visa without first securing sponsorship from an employer.

Full story

DoE science head confirmed

Soil scientist Asmeret Berhe has been appointed director of the Department of Energy’s Office of Science, having been confirmed by the Senate following her nomination by president Joe Biden in April 2021. Berhe, a professor of biogeochemistry at the University of California, Merced, was born and grew up in Eritrea. She is reportedly the first person of colour to lead the office and will hold the role for the duration of Biden’s term.

More US news online

World

Key institutes ‘need better recognition’

Research and technology organisations are sometimes “invisible” to governments, says report

Robin Bisson

Research and technology organisations—such as Germany’s 75 Fraunhofer institutes—need better recognition if they are to have economic and social impact, according to a study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

RTOs are non-profit organisations that work with the public and private sector to produce technological and social innovations, but the OECD study suggests that the varying models of these organisations has led to confusion over their role and makes them “invisible or fragmented in national statistics”.

Some, such as the state-owned Research Institutes of Sweden, have a broad remit, while others focus on certain topics or technologies. For example, Australia’s Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation and Canada’s National Research Council have roles leading mission-oriented R&D policies.

The study—supported by the European Association of Research and Technology Organisations (Earto)—says that RTOs fall into four categories: network-based; focused on a sector; focused on a technology; and larger, more integrated organisations.

But the study’s authors—Philippe Larrue and Orestas Strauka from the OECD Directorate for Science, Technology and Innovation—say more effort must be made to define exactly what they are and measure their national contributions, to increase government recognition of them as mechanisms for tackling societal challenges.

Funding models

Larrue and Strauka say funding among RTOs, and even within them, differs greatly, and that the ideal model comprises an “equal funding share of basic, competitive and commissioned funding”.

They call for a review of funding modes so that RTOs can “best contribute to societal challenges with the adequate time horizons, scale and scope”.

According to the report, the roles and focus of these organisations have evolved over the past 10 years, and the budgets of those examined have “increased very significantly since 2007”.

“These changes of RTOs’ de facto missions are gradual and mostly related to evolutions of the demand from their clients and needs from the society in general, often mediated or amplified by policy and regulatory changes,” the authors say.

These changes include a growing focus on achieving societal impact; generating medium and longer-term impacts; and collaborating more with different partners, such as companies and universities.

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the changes, the authors say, by increasing awareness of RTOs’ impact. They suggest that this increased recognition should be strengthened, saying: “The scale of some of the future challenges ahead—and Covid is just one example—creates a need for [cooperation] at international level, which would be facilitated by a clear definition of RTOs.”

The study’s authors call for policymakers to improve the framework conditions for these organisations and help them undertake structural changes.

They also ask policymakers to consider how they could help strengthen European RTO networks, adding that they benefit less from public funding than non-European organisations.

> “[RTOs are] invisible or fragmented in national statistics.”
>
> **OECD** study

News in brief

South African budget falls short

South Africa’s higher education, science and innovation minister, Blade Nzimande, has admitted that not nearly enough money is allocated to science, innovation and technology in the country. Speaking after the parliamentary 2022/23 budget vote for science and innovation on 17 May, he told Research Professional News that the current situation was due to significant and long-standing budget cuts. “Honestly, we don’t have enough money,” he said.

Full story

Australian staff seek change

A national coalition of university staff and students has called for an overhaul of university governance in Australia to fight “corporatisation”. Public Universities Australia proposed a “model law” that would see governing bodies made up largely of active academics and community members; chancellors and vice-chancellors would be “democratically elected”; and a new regulatory body would be set up to monitor universities’ financial performance.

Full story

New Zealand opens up borders

International students are to have full access to New Zealand from the end of July, after a change of government policy. Full student visa processing will begin on 31 July, instead of in October as originally planned. Universities had been desperate to have students return sooner and were critical of the slow timeframe. Universities New Zealand chief executive Chris Whelan said the change brought “much-needed certainty” for international students.

Full story

FUNDING INSIGHT

Funding at a glance

News from Research Professional's funding team

Soil mission call

The EU has made €95 million available for research to improve soil health, via methods such as land decontamination, increasing soil biodiversity and 'carbon farming'—the capture of carbon in plants so it will not contribute to global warming. The money is coming via the 2022 funding call for the EU's R&D-based mission on soil health. Applications can be made in 10 different topics and will be evaluated in a single-stage process, with some topics requiring collaborative proposals. The call closes on 27 September. Its budget is 50 per cent higher than the 2021 call, which offered €62m for eight topics.

Reform call

Researchers looking for funding to work on reforms and enhancements of the European research and innovation system have submitted proposals requesting around €240 million from an EU call—almost four times the budget of €60.5m. The call is seeking to support collaboration between policymakers working on national research and innovation programmes, knowledge circulation, institutional reform, improving research careers and boosting the use of research results. Results are due by the end of July, with grants to be signed in December.

Spanish spending

Spain's public spending on research and innovation was almost 50 per cent higher in 2021 than the previous year, according to its science ministry. The ministry announced that it invested €3 billion in 2021 and said this was €939 million more than in 2020. It said the increase was supported by the EU's Covid-19 recovery fund, and that the 2022 budget for research and innovation was almost 19 per cent higher still than in 2021, at €3.8bn. Spending on health research and innovation was a particular highlight of 2021, the ministry said.

Polish returns

Poland's National Agency for Academic Exchange has announced the latest round of its programme to fund the return of researchers to the country, which for the first time is being supported with funds from the National Centre for Research and Development. Funding of up to 400,000 zloty (€86,000) per researcher can be used to cover salaries, resettlement costs and members of research groups, while recipients are also encouraged to apply for additional funding.

Novo Nordisk Prize

The Novo Nordisk Prize, which recognises outstanding contributions to biomedical science, is nearing the deadline of 1 June for 2023 applications. Winners receive 5 million Danish kroner (€672,000), of which 90 per cent is a research grant and the remaining 10 per cent for personal use. Nominations from individual researchers and institutions are welcomed, but self-nominations are not allowed. Winners of the 2022 prize included Uğur Şahin and Katalin Karikó, who were recognised for work on mRNA that led to the development of vaccines against Covid-19.

Opportunities in numbers

21%

The percentage of agricultural funding opportunities on the Research Professional database that relate to livestock and animal science, which are open to researchers in Europe.

137

The number of prizes on the database open to European researchers in the arts.

€20 million

The highest grant listed on the database for research in physical geography available to researchers in Europe.

Top Fops: Picks of the week

Funding opportunities hand-picked by our expert funding team.
See more on www.researchprofessional.com

Gendered research in Slavic studies

The Association for Women in Slavic Studies is accepting nominations for its graduate research prize worth $1,000 (€950) to support women's and gender studies in any field of Slavic, Eastern European or Central Asian studies by a woman.
Deadline: 1 September 2022

See this opportunity online

Systematic change for a sustainable future

Academics and independent researchers may now apply to have their living expenses covered as a fellow at The New Institute in Hamburg, Germany to help determine the future of a sustainable democracy.
No deadline

See this opportunity online

Insight | European Research Council

Beating the odds

For many Africans, there are extra hurdles to attaining ERC glory

Robin Bisson

Winning a European Research Council grant is a career-defining moment for any researcher.

Accordingly, competition for grants is intense—and made even more so by the fact that the ERC's funding schemes are open to all nationalities, as long as winners take up their grant at an institution within the EU or a country associated to Horizon Europe.

However, this does not mean that grantees must cut ties with institutions outside of the EU, as Angela Liberatore, the head of the ERC Executive Agency's scientific department, explained at a webinar for African applicants earlier this year.

Grantees can keep a dual affiliation with a host institution in Europe and an African institution, splitting their time between the two, she related.

Going the extra mile

While the ERC has funded more than 10,000 grantees since its launch in 2007, only 149 applications have come from researchers of African nationality, and only 14 have applied while based in Africa, Liberatore said. Currently, there are just 16 ERC grantees of African nationality.

One of those is Jennifer Robinson, a geography professor at University College London in the UK, who won an Advanced Grant in 2019. Robinson, who spoke at the webinar, explained how African researchers need to go the extra mile in an already competitive field for ERC grants.

"Writing from an African context, you will have to try and make yourself eligible in a way perhaps that other people don't," she said.

"You might have to do a little bit more explaining about your career trajectory."

This is because African researchers might not have followed a career route that conforms to European expectations.

Robinson added that African researchers should "insist that what you are saying is intellectually robust and important, even though it's not the standard European perspective".

Laying the foundations

Robinson's number-one piece of advice was that budding applicants should start the process early.

"It's a huge effort to prepare; it takes a lot of time," she said, suggesting that applicants should get as much feedback as possible when developing a proposal.

Robinson's recommendation was to use the advice of friends and colleagues to hone ideas early on. "I started to include some of the ideas in presentations I was doing to get feedback and see what works," she recalled.

This all fed into what she called "the piece of advice that's most important if you're applying from an African context: that you have to really put some good support in place".

This might include carefully choosing a European host institution that has experience of managing ERC grants and making the most of pre-existing networks.

"Maybe you've helped a famous European scholar navigate their way around your city or helped them with some data. Call in the favour—they owe you," Robinson said.

Risk management

When it comes to the project, the ERC is laser-focused on excellence and expects big ideas. But the bigger the idea, the bigger the risk, and Robinson noted that applicants will need to show evaluators how they plan to mitigate risks.

"In terms of working in Africa, you might have to work a little harder at showing how you will be able to realise this research in an African context," she said. "For me, that came up in things like security and data availability."

Making proposals easy to read and easy to navigate is a must, as panel members will have many applications to read through. Robinson advised planning where applicants will be for the final stages of proposal-writing, and who will be able to help make sure everything is as polished as possible. "I was on a family beach holiday, so I was forced to go lie on the beach all day and then sit up all night until five o'clock [in the morning] trying to work on my proposal," she recalled.

Pick your peers

"You also want to be building on your strengths so you have to show that you deserve this project," Robinson stressed. She advised that applicants should carefully choose which panel they will apply to among the 25 subject panels that the ERC has, covering all fields of science.

"Look at the panel you've selected—is this going to be the right one for you? Are people going to be sympathetic to your work?"

She also highlighted the applicant's ability to be strategic when it comes to who will be reviewing their proposal.

"You can exclude people who are gatekeepers and don't like your work," she said, referencing the fact that the ERC allows applicants to request up to three people to be excluded as peer reviewers.

Again, this is a power that is potentially valuable to African researchers in particular. "In many fields, there is a deep exclusion of African concerns from the European academy, so really work on your reference lists and your insights to make your case emphatically," Robinson urged.

Funding opportunities: Highlights

An overview of funding opportunities published in Europe and around the world

Europe

The **European Defence Agency** is inviting bids to measure its activities in relation to environmental, social and governance criteria, with funding worth €250,000 over four years.

Researchers can apply to work on projects for the **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development** on policy decisions related to the sustainable use of natural resources in food, agriculture, forests and fisheries.

The EU's **Directorate-General for Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union** is inviting tenderers to work on a study to monitor the economic impact of EU restrictive measures, worth €250,000 for one year.

See Europe highlights online

Nordic

The **Science for Life Laboratory** in Sweden is inviting Young scientists to apply for prizes recognising the best research thesis related to life sciences, worth up to $30,000 (€28,000).

Finland's **Hanken School of Economics** is inviting researchers and teachers to visit its institution for research and academic purposes, with up to €1,200 available in travel and accommodation costs.

Young researchers can apply for fellowships at **Lundbeck Foundation** to establish an independent profile or research group in biomedical, clinical or health sciences, with fellowships worth up 10 million Danish kroner (€1.3m) each over five years.

See Nordic highlights online

North America

The **National Research Council Canada** is accepting proposals for its call on R&D projects that achieve a cleaner, more sustainable Canadian energy and chemical industry through materials innovation. Up to C$750,000 (€554,000) is available.

The **US Department of Defense** is supporting early phase clinical trials of interventions with the potential to impact the treatment or management of service-connected visual dysfunction, worth up to $2.6 million (€2.4m).

The **American Philosophical Association** is supporting diversity and inclusiveness projects in philosophy, with grants worth $20,000 over three years.

See North America highlights

Rest of World

Researchers can apply for the **Prince Sultan Bin Abdulaziz International Prize for Water**, which recognises multidisciplinary scientific work seen as a breakthrough in any water-related field, with a prize worth $266,000 (€253,000).

The **Sheikh Zayed Book Award** is inviting applications from writers, intellectuals and publishers whose writing and translation in humanities enriches Arab intellectual, cultural, literary and social life, with prizes worth 750,000 dirhams each (€190,000).

The **Japanese Broadcasting Corporation** is recognising audiovisual content that shows high-quality educational effects, with prizes worth up to $5,000.

See RoW highlights online

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Explore our comprehensive database of research funding opportunities covering every discipline from around the world. Filter by subject, eligibility, award type and award amount to find the perfect opportunities for your research.

INSIDE OUT

Friends in high places

Your correspondent was struck recently by the number of people with in-depth knowledge of R&D taking up positions of power in politics.

This week, a delegation of the European Parliament Committee on Industry, Research and Energy travelled to Portugal, where their hosts included the former EU research commissioner, now mayor of Lisbon, Carlos Moedas, as well as former researcher and European Commission science adviser, now research and higher education minister of Portugal, Elvira Fortunato.

Elsewhere, France's president Emmanuel Macron appointed Sylvie Retailleau, the president of the University of Paris-Saclay, as the new French minister for education, research and innovation. Stephane Berghmans, director of research and innovation at the European University Association, and Kurt Deketelaere, secretary general of the League of European Research Universities, described the appointment as "excellent" and "fantastic" news respectively.

Of course, the appointment of people with genuine expertise to a relevant role in government is not rare in Europe. But it often causes a jolt of surprise from our colleagues in London, who are more used to seeing domestic appointments filled by political allies of the prime minister with little direct experience of their briefs.

Perhaps the most eye-catching recent European appointment is that of Robbert Dijkgraaf to the role of Dutch minister for education and science. At an event this month, the theoretical physicist and former head of the renowned Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton talked of his confidence that the Dutch government would soon meet its target to increase national spending on R&D from under 2.2 per cent of GDP to the target of 2.5 per cent (see P6).

That said, your correspondent can't help but wonder which kind of appointment is most effective. Those with direct experience of their brief ought to have a better grasp of it than their more politically minded counterparts. But is the latter group more effective at the cut-and-thrust of political manoeuvring? We may gain a clue in about a month, when the Dutch government publishes its spending plan.

Whatever it takes

An indication of the extent to which political and academic leaders wanted to attend an event held in Leiden, the Netherlands, this month—to mark the 20th anniversary of the League of European Research Universities—came from the efforts they made to overcome travel disruption between the host city and Brussels.

Arriving at an opening drinks reception wearing sportier footwear than usual, indicative perhaps of having run for a transport connection, MEP Christian Ehler said: "Sorry for being late—besides a canoe, I tried everything to get here. The flight was not available, the train was gone, we rented a car, but I'm here."

Speaking shortly after the MEP, the European Research Council president Maria Leptin said: "Do you know what my first line in this typewritten talk says? It says: 'I'm very glad to be here.'" Amid laughter, she added: "Yes, I'm so glad to finally be here!"

Research rewind

2012: International funders team up in Global Research Council

Ten years ago, heads of research funding agencies from all over the world launched a Global Research Council during a meeting convened by the US National Science Foundation in Washington DC.

The council was a voluntary "virtual organisation" to improve collaboration among 58 public funding bodies by discussing issues of shared interest. In particular, it aimed to provide shared definitions for scientific integrity and ideas on promoting open access to research data.

The council released its first statement—a set of principles for peer review, including transparency, impartiality and confidentiality—at its inaugural meeting. It wanted to help well-established funders improve their practices, said the head of the US National Science Foundation, Subra Suresh.

Read the full article from Research Europe on 24 May 2012

* Diary dates

Online
3 June
The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities is organising a virtual seminar on the Bologna Process of higher education reform.

Event details

Online
10 June
The European Association of Research Managers and Administrators will be hosting an online afterparty to its May annual conference, hailed as "a great opportunity to connect with some speakers, contributors and colleagues before summer starts".

Event details

Online
14 June
The European University Association will host a webinar on science communication and how it could support democracy.

Event details

Manchester
22-24 June
The focus of the European University Association's annual conference on doctoral education will be on timing, including the length of doctoral training and how it fits with those training part-time.

Event details

Online
28 June
The European University Association will host a webinar on the use of scientific results in evidence-based policymaking.

Event details