

Improving Foundation-Commission Collaboration

Context

Almost 1000 ‘public-benefit foundations’ provide over €5billion¹ to research and innovation (R&I) in Europe, with many more sharing the Commission’s ambitions. Developing the relationship and dialogue between foundations and the European Commission (EC) can improve the impact of each other’s work.

Foundations have significant expertise to contribute to the European Research Area (ERA). The EC’s High Level Group² on maximising the impact of EU R&I noted the value that foundations could bring to the ERA. In their report, LAB-FAB-APP, they gave several relevant recommendations:

- **Reaching 3% GDP spend on research**, “*Co-funding mechanisms with... foundations... should be promoted, both at EU and national levels*”.
- Supporting **mission-based research**, “*Partnerships with foundations... should... mobilise joint investment in established missions, through a simple and flexible co-fund mechanism*”.
- **Mobilising and involving citizens**, 77% of foundations work to inform the public about research³.

Several issues complicate collaboration between foundations and the Commission. Foundations vary greatly by, for example: funding models, governance, size or geographical remit. This has made it difficult to find a common legal definition for ‘a foundation’. Foundations also value their flexibility and autonomy. Factors such as transparency and rules of participation within the Horizon 2020 Regulation similarly complicate matters for the Commission. Recognising this variety and these characteristics is crucial to developing a successful framework for collaboration.

A successful Framework Programme 9 should therefore look to offer a flexible, multi-pillared collaboration to get the best from foundations. No pillar is mutually exclusive.

Strategic Alignment of funding

Interacting in a more systematic way can enhance the impact of funding. An annual meeting between foundation leaders, potentially through the European Foundation Centre Research Forum, and the Commission could improve alignment and reduce duplication. The Research Forum can also act as a convenor to consult more widely with foundations when required. Finding areas of common interest with clear goals could set a platform for those willing to cooperate further.

DG RTD, as the driver of European research, is in an excellent position to coordinate foundation relationships. This can include sharing good-practice with other Directorate Generals. The Expert Group on Venture Philanthropy and Social Investments, set up by DG RTD, is an excellent example of this. To make it easier for foundations to engage with the EC there should also be a single point of contact within DG RTD for enquiries.

Co-operation in funding

Several foundations use their funding to complement existing EU schemes. Broadening the Seal of Excellence⁴ to other pillars, or allowing accredited foundations to award it, could build on this.

By sharing details and developments of evaluation techniques, both the EC and foundations could increase efficiency in their grant assessment. Further, information sharing between foundations and the EC could improve understanding of grants management approaches, for example good practice in administering cross-border schemes.

¹ <http://euforistudy.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Synthesis-Report.pdf>

² https://ec.europa.eu/research/evaluations/pdf/archive/other_reports_studies_and_documents/hlg_2017_report.pdf

³ EUFORI, <http://euforistudy.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Synthesis-Report.pdf>

⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/research/soe/index.cfm?pg=what>

Follow-on funding can enhance the impact of individual pieces of research. For example, Wellcome gives top-up grants to encourage researchers to share results with wider audiences. This is not possible for the Commission as it may require a second competitive call. Sharing application outcomes, alongside directing applicants to interested foundations, can help leverage funding in the ERA. This would also allow foundations to focus geographically or thematically, and improve the efficiency of spending for both parties.

Joint challenges and the research system

The Commission and foundations share an interest in an excellent research system. Foundation expertise can contribute to the development of research policy, for example, in Open Science or gender and diversity mainstreaming. A public-private research funding convention could bring funders together to set shared goals for research issues like public engagement or technology transfer.

Foundations can also help develop wider policy. Foundations work with several Commission DGs, such as DG Justice or DEVCO to create an enabling environment for research and the operation of EU-based non-profit organisations – for example protecting research and innovation from new rules against terrorism financing, or Wellcome’s work on the General Data Protection Regulation. Making it easier for foundations to collaborate and give money across borders can improve progress towards the ERA.

Larger foundations may wish to cooperate in addressing global challenges. However, there are significant challenges to pooling foundation and Commission funding. The joint Birth Day Prize⁵ between the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Merck and the Commission is an example that could be built on for challenges fitting with the Sustainable Development Goals. Involving foundations in defining mission-based research may be another way of achieving this. One priority should be clear legal routes to work together on initiatives like the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations.

A simple and effective starting point could be recognising foundations in the Framework Programme 9 regulation. Article 25 of the Horizon 2020 Regulation, for example, outlines the criteria for the Commission to work transparently with industry⁶. A similar provision, could improve collaboration with foundations. Template terms in the regulation could include:

1. added value at the union and foundation level;
2. a shared vision to enhance R&I;
3. key indicators and outcomes of a given programme, based on research impact; and,
4. defined roles for each partner, including use or direction of funds.

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⁵ <http://ec.europa.eu/research/horizonprize/index.cfm?prize=birthday>

⁶ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:347:0104:0173:EN:PDF>