

PUT OUR MONEY WHERE YOUR MOUTH IS – ENGAGE TALENTED YOUTH –

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Abstract. In applied politics, even the most obvious and plausible arguments, supported by scientific advice, might not be sufficient to outweigh pressures dictated by various interest groups, be they local, national or beyond. It is reality. Researchers, educators and the scientific community must face it. Regretfully for talented youth.

Keywords. Talented youth, EU RTD framework programme, EU research fund.

Facts, Advice, Experience

The EU is currently lagging behind its global competitors. The competitiveness gap is widening or at best close to stable [1]. Among the EU countries, economic divergence is growing. Rich countries are getting richer compared to the average and the poor are getting poorer. The EU's efforts to achieve economic and social convergence are in question. [2].

If you are poor, invest [3]. Europe has the duty to support gifted young individuals [4].

Responding to the deep economic depression of the early 1990s, the then Government of Finland introduced harsh cut-and-save policies. That is, except for research where the Government increased public spending [5]. Today, Finland tops the country competitiveness rankings ahead of the US, Sweden and Denmark [6].

The Reality

The proposal for the “7th framework programme of the European Community for research, technological development and demonstration activities (2007-2013)” is currently (mid-2006) under the final stage of reaching the EU level political agreement. The honourable intentions of the EU regarding education and research training is spelled out in the proposal, inter alias [7]:

- “The seventh Framework Programme is central to achieving the Lisbon strategic goal of Europe becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world. **The triangle of knowledge - education, research and innovation - is a principal tool for achieving this goal.**”
- “The human potential in research and technology in Europe should be strengthened quantitatively and qualitatively; **better education and research training...**”

(highlighted by the authors)

In spite of their admirable political intentions, EU leaders have imposed significant budget cuts during the political negotiations. The European Commissions' budget proposal for the most relevant part for talented youth, that of the specific programme "People", was reduced from EUR 7 129 million to EUR 4 727 million. The overall budget went from EUR 72 726 million to EUR 50 521 million. [7].

This is another example of obvious discrepancy between marvellous political pledges creating "front page" commentaries and harsh political realities reported on "page three".

How did it happen – how could it happen?

At their Brussels meeting on 15-16 December 2005, the European Council disregarded the multi-annual budget proposal of the European Commission. The proposal was based on global socio-economic reasoning and considered a whole series of scientific advice. The latter have taken into account evaluation of current and previous EU research activities as well as assessment of need for continued European research.

Political forces overrode plausible advice.

The Council agreed a budget for 2007-13 that falls critically short of matching their previous pledges. Due to short-sighted national interests the much-needed drive to revitalise EU economy remains overdue. The most alarming seems to be that political leaders are reluctant to grasp the gravity of state of affairs.

It was only a few years ago (Lisbon in 2000) that these leaders adopted an ambitious ten-year programme to revitalise growth and sustainable development across the EU. Against the background of sluggish economic growth, in this initiative – known as the "Lisbon Strategy" – the EU "*set itself a new strategic goal for the next decade: to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world*".

In 2002, the Barcelona Target became an essential part of the Lisbon Strategy. Based upon the recommendation of an expert group, EU leaders agreed "*that overall spending on R&D and innovation in the Union should be increased with the aim of approaching 3% of GDP by 2010*".

The EU is lagging behind its global competitors. The competitiveness gap is widening or in best case remaining close to stable. The new "*European Innovation Scoreboard 2005*" [1] paints a grim picture for the EU innovation performance as a whole.

Both the Lisbon Strategy and Barcelona Target demonstrate political determination at the highest level to address these burning issues. But political leaders' credibility is measured against the delivery of their own pledges.

The 3% figure did not appear by magic. The issue is far more complex. There is no straightforward relationship between R&D spending and primary measures of economic success. But spending too little will definitely harm. However, simply spending more does not necessarily enhance economic performance and competitiveness. In this sense the 3% is a plausible objective.

Yet, at their December meeting, despite all of the aforementioned, EU leaders allocated funding for R&D and innovation that is a far cry from their own highly publicised ambition. This under-funding is inexcusable. The obvious lack of political wisdom and courage are signs of the sad state of affairs in the EU's "top political

machinery”. Single-minded national interests come to the surface and overshadow “the greater good”.

However, giving credit where it is due, EU leaders are only partly responsible for this unfortunate situation. In the absence of a clear roadmap to re-engage citizens, leaders continue to pay homage to a double-faced deity: while publicly championing the EU cause, defending narrow national interests behind closed doors.

In this climate, they leverage the EU for domestic policy priorities and make it the scapegoat for all unresolved problems relating to domestic affairs. Today, more than halfway through the Lisbon timetable, the progress and results so far are disappointing. The EU will find it exceedingly difficult to meet its initial Lisbon targets for and by 2010.

Could the Lisbon Strategy have been illusory from its very inception? Could a block of 15 states (EU members at the time when the Strategy was agreed) within 10 years transform itself to “*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world*”, while at the same time taking on board another 10 states?

One might want to consider that eight of these new member states and their economies had suffered for more than 40 years under the yoke of the former Soviet Union.

Whatever the answer may be, the Lisbon Strategy has started a process that can only be beneficial for the entire EU and possibly beyond. By now, the process has become more important than the initial objectives. This must be acknowledged. But in a few years time our political leaders - those still in office - will be held responsible for not making good on their own initial promises.

Consequently, the first reaction of the European Parliament must be saluted. It overwhelmingly rejected the agreement reached by heads of states and governments last December that “*does not guarantee an EU budget enhancing prosperity, competitiveness, solidarity, cohesion and security in future*” (18 January 2006). Such a firm stance in the interest of Europe will most certainly enhance the Parliament’s political credibility and relevance, and strengthen it as an institution serving the interest of European taxpayers.

The Parliament’s commendable position was not sufficient to outweigh the Council’s short-sighted position. As compared to the Commission’s initial proposal that was supported by the Parliament, severe budget cuts were imposed.

Put our money where your mouth is and employ talented youth

On the broader question of how to revitalise the EU economy, responsible political leaders in Europe must once and for all realize that highflying declarations are insufficient. Research is the most important source of innovation (the Scandinavian countries are outstanding examples). It drives economic growth, job creation, structural renewal and social cohesion. EU leaders must champion R&D and innovation both at the EU-level and at home. Talented youth must be fully engaged.

And the member states must wholeheartedly participate in the process.

Without acting in this spirit, Janus faced policies will make a European fatamorgana out of the Lisbon Strategy and the competitiveness gap between the EU and its major global competitors will remain or continue to widen. And the economic divergence will continue to grow among EU countries.

The much-needed drive to revitalise the EU economy remains overdue.

References

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