

Editorial



Gert G. Wagner,

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"How can we push growth through
research in Europe?"

It is a commonplace that research can push economic growth, but governments seem to find it extremely difficult to design really successful research policies. Not only in Germany, but in the European Union as well, one reform of research policy after another takes place. In Germany the Federal Government just recently proposed additional funding for some 'elite universities', and the European commission is constantly changing the details of its 'Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development'. From 2002 to 2006, 17.5 billion euro will be spent on 'FP6' – but the results will be marginal. Whereas the IBM laboratories in Switzerland generated two Nobel prizes in the 1980s.

The basic problem of all FP so far is that the Commission believes it can steer research by political and bureaucratic rationality – and furthermore can use research money for purposes of regional development. For example, project money under FP must go to 'less favoured regions'. In other words: the Commission – like several other governments around the globe – wants scientific excellence but does not put it unequivocally at the top of its priority list. In particular, the research community does not have the final say when it comes to decisions about spending the research money under the FP.

Now there is hope that the commission will change its research policy. There are signals that the Commission will follow a proposal of a High Level Expert Group which proposes the establishment of a 'European Research Council' which will have a budget of its own (at least 2 billion euro per year) for funding basic research in the 'European Research Area'. Under the ESRC the final decision makers would be top researchers – and not bureaucrats and politicians.

It might be somewhat puzzling to the European tax payer for billions of euros to be spent without direct democratic control. However, experience with research policy tells us that freedom of research is the only measure which guarantees such innovations as those that took place in the IBM labs. They had no masterplan for the Nobel prizes. IBM hired researchers who had shown themselves able to deliver top research results. These researchers were not asked for detailed research proposals.

The Federal Government in Germany should do the same when it tries to promote excellence within the German university system. The final decision maker must be the research community. In order to push high-quality research, centres of excellence must be identified – and those centres should get a 'credit' for some years. If whole universities are identified they should get the extra funds without reservation and with no hesitation. However, it is much more likely that not entire universities, but just clusters of excellent research will be funded, which will include both university institutes and non-university research institutes.

