

ERA Framework Public Consultation: “Areas of Untapped Potential for the Development of the European Research Area”

Introduction

NordForsk welcomes the open consultation on the ERA Future Framework, and the EU Commission's ambitions to realize a unified European research area. NordForsk was established by the Nordic research and education ministers in 2005, as a platform for cross-border cooperation in research, innovation and researcher education. Our aim is to contribute to the development of the knowledge society in the Nordic region, and consequently to a globally competitive European Research Area (ERA). Our response will outline some of the main obstacles we see in realizing the ERA, with particular focus on cross-border research cooperation, mobility, research and innovation, research infrastructures and to some extent the international dimension of the ERA. These correspond with obstacles we have faced in Nordic research cooperation, and which we have worked towards overcoming. As inspiration for the EU Commission, we will state our lessons learned in this regard.

Researchers' Careers and Mobility

Obstacle:

-The ERA faces a lack of mobility of researchers across countries and sectors. Researchers still see their career opportunities reduced by legal and practical barriers.

Nordic Lessons learned

- Mobility is a central feature in NordForsk's financing instruments, not as a goal in itself, but as a tool to create added value and scientific excellence. To achieve progress, it is important to consider a variety of mobility forms (short-term, long-term etc).
- Students and young researchers' movement across borders, sectors and research institutions should be supported, for example via economical or educational incentives.
- Researchers' mobility has to be considered in its societal context. A good social environment, education, healthcare, pension funds, etc. are important framework conditions for researchers' careers and mobility. The Nordic region has come a long way in this regard.
- Legal, administrative, societal and economical barriers to cross-border movement of researchers should be identified and mapped. Particular emphasis should be put on the societal barriers.

Cross-border research co-operation

Obstacles:

- Limited coherence and synergies between national research efforts in Europe. Research programs have primarily a national orientation. This leads to dispersion, duplications and poor use of resources.

- Complex portfolio of financing schemes in the EU, and complicated, inflexible procedures for their administration.

NordForsk's response

Nordic Lessons learned

- Added value of cross-border research cooperation is achieved through coordination and pooling of national resources, thus reducing fragmentation and creating critical mass. There is generally a common understanding among stakeholders in the Nordic region of such Nordic added value of research cooperation.
- Flexible and simple financing schemes are needed, taking a pragmatic approach, applying different variations of common pots and allowing a variable geometry in involvement (funding and thematic). Furthermore, mutual acceptance of national auditing rules, like in the Nordic region, should be aimed for in the European research programs. This would remove a key barrier to participation in European research cooperation.
- To succeed in cross-border research cooperation, commitment and involvement of the main national stakeholders is essential (ministries, research councils, universities and industry).
- Trust between the actors involved in cross-border research cooperation is of utmost importance. Due to its complexity, cross-border research cooperation often needs a trusted facilitator and platform. Building trust is a continuous and dynamic process. Nordic research cooperation can show several good examples in this regard, partly due to a climate of mutual understanding and readiness to reach consensus and compromises (not always getting the optimal solution for each country).
- A substantial part of research in Europe is carried out in and financed by the universities. The university sector should be given a strong voice in future development of cross-border research cooperation.

Integrating research and innovation¹

Obstacle:

- Research, education and innovation are the central and strongly interdependent drivers of the knowledge triangle. The ERA has achieved limited progress in developing links between them. Businesses often find it difficult to cooperate with research institutions, particularly across borders.

Nordic Lessons learned:

- Political commitment, especially in the initial phases of new initiatives, is essential to minimize the time from policy to action. New initiatives should be developed and organized in a way that facilitates trust-building and inclusion of research, education and innovation.
- Governance of innovation policy, both at the national level and in the EU, is complex, as innovation embraces a wide array of issues. To support the innovation process as a whole (from research to application of research/innovation) new ways of considering the functional borders of relevant policy areas could be needed.

¹ Innovation can be defined as “The introduction of new goods (...), new methods of production (...), the opening of new markets (...), the conquest of new sources of supply (...) and the carrying out of a new organization of any industry” (Joseph Schumpeter)”.

Research Infrastructures

Obstacle:

- *Sub-optimal cross-border exploitation of existing European research infrastructures. Excellent research infrastructures have socio-economic impact, and facilitate world-class research, but are still mainly nationally owned.*

Nordic Lessons learned:

- Building trust and consensus among key national stakeholders will be important to bring European cross-border research infrastructure cooperation forward.
- Early financial commitment from national stakeholders is essential to keep momentum and achieve progress in joint European initiatives, as Nordic cooperation and commitment in the European Spallation Source (ESS) shows.
- Flexible, smaller scale platforms for research infrastructure cooperation, such as NordForsk, could allow the EU to strengthen cross-border cooperation keep momentum, pending the work on the legal framework performed under the umbrella of the ERIC-initiatives.
- In addition to supporting cross-border use of existing infrastructure, there is a need to support upgrading of national research infrastructures into use at the European level.

International dimension

Obstacle:

-*No common strategy between the EU and its member states/associated countries for international cooperation on research and innovation. Very limited coordination of international strategies for research and innovation between them. As a result, Europe fails to take a leading role on the global scene, not least in responding to major societal challenges (“Grand challenges”).*

Nordic Lessons learned:

- NordForsk's experiences regarding research cooperation in the Arctic region could support the EU Arctic dimension and the EU Northern Dimension.
- Research programs should be opened up for contributing partners from third countries, as is done by NordForsk.
- Clear, focused and operational common strategies and priorities for international cooperation should be developed, both at national, regional and European level. Third countries cooperation is a part of the Nordic Council of Ministers' strategy. NordForsk cooperates with Russia and China on research and research driven innovation. To succeed in international cooperation, each country's different political and socio-economical conditions should be taken into account.
- To realize the ERA in the enlarged Europe, strengthened regional cooperation could be a way forward. At the same time, close links between the regions should be established, in order to tackle Grand challenges together. Nordic research cooperation is a good example of multi-level governance. The Nordic model could contribute to realizing overall EU regional priorities, as outlined in the EU Northern Dimension, Baltic Sea Strategy and the eDanube initiative.

Concluding remarks

Good framework conditions, at regional, national and European level, are key to improve the performance of the European research and innovation systems, and to create a genuine single market for knowledge, research and innovation. Only then can Europe become a leading player in the global economy in the future. The difficult financial situation in Europe today only makes this more important. Research and innovation are vital in creating economic growth and prosperity and in responding to major societal challenges.

Due to its complexity, cross-border research cooperation often needs a trusted facilitator in order to flourish. Nordic research cooperation can be a model for further development of the ERA, and for several EU regional initiatives. The Nordic model represents an efficient and flexible way of organizing cross-border research cooperation, based on trust and dialogue-based support for cross-border initiatives with a potential to turn social challenges into opportunities and progress. For more information about NordForsk's programs and initiatives, see www.nordforsk.org.