

## Science and technology deserve better from Brussels

**Delayed proposals for Europe's fifth Framework programme reflect political infighting. Research is likely to suffer as a result of poor leadership within the European Commission.**

Anyone with even superficial knowledge of the history of the European Union (EU) knows that eighteen months can be a very short time in Europolitics. Yet that is all the time that remains before the European Commission needs to issue calls for proposals for the EU's fifth Framework programme (FP5) for research and development.

The commission has cut things too fine. Its new working paper on FP5 (see page 665) shows what disappointingly little it has achieved in filling in the details of the programme's proposed content since the commission's preliminary discussion paper was published last July. Given the rocky road to political approval that the commission has yet to travel, the chances of sticking to the planned timetable are remote.

Researchers should worry not just about a lack of new Eurofunds before FP5 starts, but also about whether support will be smooth once the programme is under way. Ironically, given the commission's need and professed intention to introduce greater flexibility and internal coordination, the new management structure proposed in the working paper is of such bewildering complexity that it threatens to paralyse progress.

Such worries would not be justified if the research community could rely on a ready acceptance of the formal FP5 proposal, complete with budget, that the commission is due to publish at the end of March. That would require ministers and members of the European Parliament to put aside their differences, and innumerable stakeholders, consulted at many stages of implementation, to withhold dissent. That appears unrealistic.

What has gone wrong? In its July paper, the commission, reflecting the wishes of all member states, as well as all other interested parties critical of the fourth Framework's scatter-gun approach, stated its intentions to concentrate money on fewer areas, to make its programmes more responsive to society's needs, to make management faster and more efficient and to make its operations more transparent. Given the commendable quantities of public consultations, transparency is undoubtedly being satisfied.

But the number and themes of programmes are effectively the same as in the current Framework. The familiar emphases on support for energy, transport, telecommunications, information and life-science industrial sectors are still there, albeit moving ever closer to the market-place. The enhanced attention to be given to the needs of small and medium-size companies is indeed essential, and there is thankfully no diminution of enthusiasm for the promotion of mobility and training of young scientists. But there is little sign of the concentration of effort that so many are calling for — an indicator, therefore, of battles to come.

There has been significant repackaging. This includes the new Eurojargon "key actions" which means, to quote a senior commission official, "internal coordination and external consultation around themes intended to be highly visible in the socioeconomic forum, which give rise to, and launch, large targeted programmes".

Who wants to stiffen their sinews for that?

But the problems go deeper than the deployment of eye-glazing Eurospeak. The proposed FP5 structure is a matrix of three thematic programmes, broken down into the key actions, which are partly fed by three 'horizontal' programmes concerned with policy issues, such as training and international cooperation. The horizontal programmes also have their own independent budgets. Each of the six programmes will have to consult and coordinate with an endless list of other interests: national research programmes, European laboratories and other relevant EU activities such as social and economic assistance programmes, to name but a few.

But, at the end of the day, who is in charge of what? Who will decide when debate must end, and work begin? Who will sign the cheque and post it to the scientist? Commission officials have not been able to answer these simple questions. There is a lack of clarity that has already led to scandalous delays as turf battles have been fought between the research commission, which has prime responsibility for writing the proposal, and other commissions, such as agriculture, environment and transport, which wanted more control in defining research activities in their territories. Every battle has precipitated a new draft of the working paper. Draft thirteen is what has now been published, although the commission, not wishing to tempt fate, labels it "version 12-beta".

The EU co-decision process will then begin. Parliament (by a majority vote) and the Council of Ministers (unanimously) will both have to agree to content and cost. If achieved amicably, this could happen by the autumn. But it won't. Parliament will want more money to be spent than will ministers, and both will disagree with details of the proposed content, which, ironically, will probably lead to more actions being insisted upon, despite the fact that everyone wants 'concentration'. A conciliation process will prove necessary, adding up to six months to the process.

Once the general package has been approved, each action will have to survive further political scrutiny. That will be simpler, in that a unanimous vote within the Council of Ministers is not required, while parliament is required only to offer its opinion. However, as happened with the current Framework, the opinion of a quarrelsome parliament could be withheld for months. Pessimists would conclude that two-and-a-half years will pass between the commission's formal proposal and final approval, which would mean a delay of one year from the end of the fourth Framework.

Where should the blame be placed for this sorry state of affairs? The research commission's director general, Jorma Routti, is too rarely seen in Brussels, and appears to have been marginalized. But the buck stops with the research commissioner. To judge by performance and the standards set by her predecessors, Edith Cresson has shown a shameful lack of interest in science, too often failing to show up for important meetings and making no secret of her (time-consuming) ambition to return as soon as possible to French politics. Europe's researchers deserve better. □