

Statement by the Science Europe Governing Board on the Document ‘Towards a Maastricht for Research’ (15 October 2013)

Science Europe is an association of 53 public research organisations in 27 countries, representing a sizable proportion of the total national public investment in research across the continent. Our Member Organisations are part of the backbone of ERA, either performing research directly, or funding the research carried out in universities and laboratories all over Europe. Our Members’ core mission is to deliver and continuously develop excellent research systems.

Research policy is about keeping an open mind and an open dialogue, and building trust amongst all stakeholders. There can be no other way to advance research policy, and Science Europe has shaped its working methods around these very principles, by giving the research community a direct voice within the association.

We believe that the same holds for ERA, which is a European-level research policy. The effectiveness and competitiveness towards which ERA strives can only be achieved through mutual learning and collaboration between a wide range of stakeholders. Science Europe’s vision is that the ERA is a research environment that is globally competitive, evolving, dynamic, flexible, attractive and creative; it is a long-term project, and to strive for its ‘completion’ would be to lack ambition. But, we need to strive for its continuous evolution and its capacity to remain responsive to the ever-changing demands of modern research.

Because of this, the Science Europe Governing Board is very pleased that the European Parliament is keen to engage in this dialogue and welcomes all input that can enrich it.

We also call on the European Parliament to play its part in furthering research, as current and future EU dossiers land on its desk. For example, the European Data Protection Regulation, currently being finalised, needs to strike the right balance between concerns of privacy and the need to make sure that those doing cutting edge research are not deterred from our continent. The European Copyright Directive also needs to be ‘future-proofed’ by the European Parliament, to make sure that copyright does not get in the way of creativity and knowledge advancement. These are just two current files, but the next Parliament will most probably be faced with equally important issues, for example with regards to the portability of pension rights for people on the move. We need staunch allies in this House to look after the interests of excellent research.

We share the Parliament’s view that research is an investment in Europe’s future, not a cost. We will strongly support the Parliament in calling for appropriate funding at all levels. In the same way, we ask the Parliament for their support when we say that basic and curiosity-driven, ‘blue sky’ research must never be allowed to be seen as a luxury. True innovation happens in systems that reward risk and tolerate early failure. Researchers need conditions which ensure that their ideas are the only limitation. Just like a venture capitalist knowing that only a tiny fraction of their projects will be successful, Europe needs to invest in a knowledge ecosystem

even if there is not a direct application for every single project. This point will need to be defended over and over, now and in the future.

We would also like to urge the Parliament to look for evidence and think about policy objectives before prescribing cures. Any policy or legislative measures need to be based on a sound analysis of what works and what does not. We need more evidence-based policy and less policy-based evidence. Let's apply intellectual rigor to research policy and legislative decisions, especially when they have the potential to have disruptive effects on our research systems.

The recent ERA Progress Report bases much of its call for action on cross-border money flows. However, mobility and collaboration are not ends in themselves, and are only justified in so far as they support scientific endeavours. Evidence provided with the support of Science Europe shows that European cross-country collaboration at researcher level is similar in volume to inter-state collaboration in the United States, even if Europe has much higher administrative, linguistic and cultural diversity. This begs the question: are we focusing only on the negative, instead of recognising and playing to our strengths?

Europe has the strength of being a diverse research ecosystem, where national research systems co-exist, co-operate and compete via the Framework Programmes. Diversity allows for different models to emerge, for national capacity building objectives to be pursued, and for a plurality of approaches to be tried and tested. These are the best conditions in which to let knowledge thrive.

Horizon 2020 is focused on knowledge application. Let's not forget that national programmes play the complementary role of supporting local knowledge communities and their infrastructures in a way that the Framework Programmes cannot and do not. It is not possible to analyse national research programmes exclusively through the lens of European integration and defragmentation. If we do so, we will give up on the main engines of our competitiveness: diversity and competition.

National research organisations work in a symbiotic relationship with their research communities. The members of Science Europe interact and collaborate every day to foster research in a responsive and flexible manner, across borders. We would like to accept this invitation to discuss ERA policy in the same spirit: responsively and without any pre-conceptions.