



Coimbra Group Response to the EU Commission's Green Paper

Brussels, 31 August 2007

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Guido.Langouche@kuleuven.be
Prof. Jean-Marie Boisson (Montpellier)
jean-marie.boisson@univ-montp1.fr
Prof. László Boros (Budapest)
borl@ludens.elte.hu
Prof. Mar Campins Eritja (Barcelona)
mcampins@ub.edu
Prof. Cristina Robalo Cordeiro (Coimbra)
Vicereit@ci.uc.pt
Prof. Luigi F Donà dalle Rose (Padova)
dona@pd.infn.it
Prof. Ain Heinaru (Tartu)
Ain.Heinaru@ut.ee
Anne Lonsdale, CBE (Cambridge)
al213@cam.ac.uk

Office

Egmontstraat 11, rue d'Egmont
BE-1000 Brussels

Director: Ms Inge Knudsen
Knudsen@coimbra-group.eu
Ms Axelle Devaux
Devaux@coimbra-group.eu
Ms Anna Quici
Quici@coimbra-group.eu
Ms Nathalie Sonveaux
Sonveaux@coimbra-group.eu
Mr Serge Ngangue
Ngangue@coimbra-group.eu

Tel + 32 2 513 83 32
Fax + 32 2 513 64 11

<http://www.coimbra-group.eu>

The Coimbra Group (CG) welcomes the European Commission's intention to reinforce efforts to further develop research co-operation throughout the European Union towards the implementation of a European Research Area (ERA). The European Commission's recent Green Paper document and the associated consultation are intended as a basis for further development of the ERA, a concept that was enunciated in parallel with the Lisbon agenda in the year 2000, as a means of coordinating national research policies and activities in terms of objectives, expertise and resources.

The present CG Statement outlines the general views of the CG on the ERA and the Commission's Green Paper. The responses of the CG to the thirty-five specific questions raised in the Green Paper have been collected in the Annex to this Statement. The CG Statement itself focuses on thematic and systemic issues of importance to the CG Universities and their active contribution to an ERA, in particular

- The concept of networks
- Coordination and planning of the research efforts
- Added European value and the essential role of universities.

The CG is concerned that the Green Paper operates with concepts such as "networks" and "coordination" without including these concepts among the issues raised for discussion in the present consultation round. Likewise, the issue of added value to the European universities of the ERA process remains subject to interpretation. The three issues are essential to the development of Universities in Europe and fundamental to the understanding of the CG responses provided in the Annex, as many of the questions posed within the Green Paper depend on their interpretation. The CG believes that they should be issues for the consultation, and are therefore addressed in this Statement:

- The first is the underlying assumption in the Green Paper that the European research effort should be dominated by networks of specialised institutions, with countries and regions progressively specialising in particular areas. Such a division of labour on a national and regional basis, would require close coordination if it were to operate effectively.
- The second is that there should be greater coordination and planning of cross-Europe research, joint programming at European level and common priorities. Indeed, the network model itself would require such coordination if it is to be responsive to the variety of roles that research in Europe is required to undertake.
- The added European value of research collaboration across borders is an issue of the utmost importance to the CG Universities. "Networks" or "collaboration" as defined in the Green Paper must not be an end in themselves. The end point must be added value. The key question is, how is this to be achieved? The issue is therefore raised here as a CG contribution to a productive dialogue.

Networks

National, European and global networking are intrinsic to most modern research in Europe. However, the most effective networks are created in response to a particular research opportunity and are driven by the complementarity of ideas and capabilities amongst network partners in seizing the opportunity.

The Green Paper, and FP7, stresses the importance of developing robust, long term, legally constituted networks. We are concerned that such networks will see this as a means of capturing long term funding streams, a development which will tend to freeze structures and behaviours that are currently dynamic, will create complicity between the Commission and favoured clients, and create a model of research that we believe is deeply misconceived, for these and the following reasons:

- Changing research partners is a creative process. It brings new sets of ideas and approaches into conjunction. We should stimulate rather than inhibit this by supporting the formation of new networks, even though they are ephemeral, rather than by fossilising networks into permanency.
- Trends in the demand for research are for interdisciplinary efforts to address issues that rarely fall wholly into the domain of any one discipline. A network of specialised nodes is not an effective way of responding to such demands.
- The experience highlighted by CG Universities is that the most effective ways in which to support and encourage research networks are to have a series of diverse, relevant specialisms working in close proximity so that they become aware of the perceptions and approaches of other disciplines and are better able to work together on interdisciplinary projects. Universities, as no other institutions, fulfil this description, and can and do play a vital synthesising/synergising role. The Green Paper falls short in recognising the importance of this key role of universities.
- If networks are to replace individual institutions as the basic units of research organisation, they will be more expensive and managerially problematic than individual institutions.

Coordination and Planning

There is a role for Europe-level coordination and planning, but it should be very clear about the issues to which this should apply. The European Union contains a series of Member States each of which has its own priorities for research in relation to its own perceived needs. We should expect those priorities to remain distinctive. Rather than developing a separate European policy and set of priorities for research, we should be developing policies for processes that have general applicability to the diversity of Member State priorities. These will be enabling processes such as European level planning and provision of expensive infrastructure, a European patent, access to European Research Council (ERC) funding for basic research based only on the criterion of excellence. Other, thematic priorities should be in the hands of national and regional bodies.

The national level should be responsible for its own thematic priorities for research, priorities for capacity building, and processes of application and commercialisation, including the necessary legal frameworks, that are well-adapted to the national economy. It would be more logical for individual states to be responsible for innovation-related activity, as economic benefit is delivered at national and regional levels, with Europe, in contrast being a driver of basic research competition.

This is not to say that major European thematic priorities will not or should not arise (cf. below). Europe has not been slow to recognise major research opportunities that benefit from collaboration, such as CERN, the Greenland Ice Sheet Project, etc., which arise through discussions in the many European and international research fora. A centralised European body with a thematic planning and coordinating role will be necessarily more distant from researchers and will be an unnecessary additional layer of bureaucracy unless its specific role is to identify projects of such a scale or such widespread significance that European or extra-European collaboration is justified.

Added European value and the essential role of universities

It is a source of concern to the CG that in its consultation, the Commission chooses to leave out higher order issues, on the presumption that they have already been decided, leaving only matters of detail for consultation. The CG has earlier commented on the same unfortunate approach in connection to the consultation on a European Institute of Technology¹.

1. Contribution from the Coimbra group Universities to the Discussion on the European Institute of Technology, (Tartu, 17 May 2006) <http://www.coimbra-group.eu/DOCUMENTS/GA2006%20-%20EIT%20Paper.pdf>

To the CG Universities, the concept of added European value is of the utmost importance. As mentioned above, there are several examples of the major benefits obtained from collaboration, some of them originating as EU initiatives, others from other international bodies, often established by the researchers themselves. In relation to the present consultation it would be of interest to point to collaboration within the framework of ESFRI, the establishing of the ERC, and the intentions to develop a framework to facilitate the mobility of researchers, be it geographically or sectorally.

The CG would, however, underline the necessity to base such co-operation on principles of best practice and to combine such efforts with collaboration on a global scale. We would like to refer to the response earlier forwarded to the European Commission to the Communication on the “Modernisation Agenda for Universities”², and we regret to see that a burgeoning understanding of the importance of universities displayed in the Communication is not repeated in the Green Paper. As underlined earlier, the universities are uniquely placed as “meeting places”, as producers of new knowledge, transmitted via teaching, publishing, collaboration with enterprises, spin-outs, etc., and as places of preservation and development of knowledge in libraries, databanks and cohorts of graduates and doctorates.

The key elements that are missing from the Commission’s position are comprehensive research-intensive universities, which, compared with specialist government institutions, are more cost effective loci for basic research; they are able to address the vital inter-disciplinary agenda in a more efficient way than is a network of specialist institutions; they are more powerful attractors of indigenous and global talents; they have, in recent years, proven to be more dynamic and flexible in responding to the innovation agenda than other public research bodies; and, crucially, they integrate research with the education of the rising generation of researchers.

The informal and formal networks in existence among researchers in all disciplines constantly transform and reform in interdisciplinary collaboration across borders and all benefit from the added value of European as well as global co-operation and joint projects. It is only a minimum of such activities that will ever come to the attention of funding bodies such as the European Commission’s Framework Programmes, but they are and always have been the backbone of the development of knowledge.

The Coimbra Group has discussed the Green Paper at its General Assembly meeting on 1 June this year, and the present Statement is the result of a hearing among its member Universities, with input from the Doctoral Studies and Research Task Force, the Rectors’ Meeting and the Executive Board. The CG Statement has also been discussed with LERU, the League of European Research Universities, with Professor Geoffrey Boulton as the representative of both organisations and coordinator of the process.

2. Tartu Statement, , 19 May 2006 - <http://www.coimbra-group.eu/DOCUMENTS/GA2006%20-%20Tartu%20Statement.pdf>