FP7: Research Infrastructures Activity

Research Infrastructures are clearly a core component of the European Research Area. It would therefore be expected that, if the overall budget for FP7 represents a significant increase relative to FP6, this would provide opportunities for new and enhanced programmes within the Research Infrastructures Activity. This submission emphasises above all the need for an increased and ongoing dialogue in the preparation of the programme, both with regard to the overall themes and continuing on to the details of its implementation.

1. Integrated Infrastructure Initiatives (I3)

1.1 General aspects

There has been a significant investment in setting up I3 in FP6. Despite some initial skepticism, the collaborative opportunities afforded by the I3 are so far generally viewed positively. It is therefore very important that I3 remain as a key part of the Research Infrastructures Activity in FP7. However there are some issues that need to be addressed.

A main feature of the I3 is supposed to be devolution of control from the Commission to the I3 management. However the level of detailed control is still extremely high. The work required to submit a proposal, negotiate a contract and submit the annual reports is considerable. The 7% allowed for management costs is clearly insufficient considering the amount of work required, so coordinating organizations are normally subsidizing this aspect. These factors may deter, or even prevent, some groups from making proposals and in future may make it difficult to find people or organizations willing to take on the management role.

Proposal: There should be an active dialogue between the current I3 and the Commission, aimed at streamlining procedures both for FP6 and FP7. Allowed management costs should be increased from 7% to 10% and partners using the Additional Cost model should be allowed to charge management costs relating to core staff.

1.2 Financial reporting

The impact of the financial reporting rules in FP6 is still unclear. Although we understand that the Commission is accountable for the funding that it provides, it is nevertheless neither in its interests, nor in the interests of European researchers, that a significant amount of the available funding in FP6 and FP7 is used to pay accountants. Financial reporting requirements must be appropriate and proportionate. Note that the funding of individual partners is not typically higher in FP6 than in FP5, even though the funding for single projects (I3s) is much higher.

Proposal: In FP7 it should be specified that public bodies are not required to use external auditors. The allowed timescale for financial reporting in FP6 is totally unrealistic and should be relaxed.

1.3 Access Activities

Access Activities are a key component of the I3. Access programmes have been very beneficial in making a wider range of infrastructures available to a wider range of European scientists, and should certainly be continued. The 'user fee' system that has been in operation through several FP is straightforward and works well. It should not be changed. It would not be appropriate for Access to infrastructures to be managed through a European Research Council or other external organization. Decisions on access must continue to be made by peer review, and it is crucial that they are made by specialists who understand the details of the proposed work and the technical capabilities of the individual infrastructures. Decisions must be made on a timescale and in a way that is determined by the operation of the infrastructures and their programmes, rather than by the administrative requirements of an external body. For many infrastructures the EU access programme is only a small proportion of the overall access given, and it needs to be managed in a consistent manner.

It would also not be appropriate for funding to be given directly to users, who would then choose at which infrastructure they would 'spend' it. The 'ticket' system which was introduced in the UK for synchrotron and neutron sources was not successful and was abandoned.

Many countries increasingly emphasise the need for research funding to cover the real costs of that research, so these countries may be increasingly unwilling to subsidize EU access to their research infrastructures at the expense of national users. Since research infrastructures are a key component of the ERA, we would suggest that the Commission takes into consideration the requirements for stability and long term support, as well as its desire to broaden access opportunities. They should therefore be prepared to pay user fees representing real (operating) costs. This would still represent good 'value for money', since the substantial investment costs are not included. We would also note that the period of 4-5 years for each FP is short in relation to the long term planning needed for infrastructures. The proposal that FP7 be extended to 7 years is welcomed.

Proposal: The user fee system for Access Activities is simple and generally accepted and should be continued in FP7. The current mechanisms for peer review based on scientific merit work well and should not be changed.

1.4 Joint Research Activities (JRA)

JRA are particularly important for some I3. However the current 50% funding rule does not encourage the participation of SME. Sometimes the SME participation is more important to the I3 than the I3 is to the SME. More flexibility is therefore required concerning the allowed cost models.

While in principle I3 contracts allow flexibility in the operation of JRA, in practice the level of detail that needs to be supplied at the proposal and contract negotiation stages, and the corresponding commitments made by the partners (since the EU only provides 50% funding for JRA) makes changes difficult. In many cases it is not meaningful to specify deliverables for later years in a JRA, when the early results are not yet known.

Proposal: The allowed costing models for the participation of SME in JRA should be more flexible, with the responsibility for negotiation being delegated to the I3 coordinator (while maintaining appropriate financial safeguards). I3 should be allowed to provide outline plans for JRA within the proposal and contract negotiation, to be prioritized and then specified in the required detail as the project progresses. I3, in particular new consortia, should be allowed to develop JRA ideas as an early stage of Networking Activities, for submission to a second call for proposals for the programme.

1.5 Networking Activities

Networking acts as a primary opportunity to develop the trans-national links and cooperation which build and strengthen the research community. It also plays a critical role in early-stage development of what will become future JRA activities.

Proposal: Networking activities must remain a key part of any I3.

1.6 Training

Many of those benefiting from Access Activities are students and postdocs, so training is an integral part of an I3. It is also an integral part of many of the Networking Activities. However, because training is formally the remit of the Marie Curie programmes, the training possibilities within I3 are somewhat restricted. We suggest a more flexible approach, with training being formally an additional allowable activity within an I3. Small scale training could be contained within an I3 budget, as in FP6. For larger scale activities an I3 could apply as a consortium for any of the Marie Curie Actions, and any funding could be incorporated and managed within the I3 rather than separately. Alternatively, I3 partners or other consortia would of course be able to apply for Marie Curie Actions individually.

Proposal: Training Activities should be a formally allowed activity for an I3. A flexible link should be established between the Research Infrastructures Activity and Marie Curie Actions. (See also 1.8)

1.7 Participation of Third Countries

Within FP6 the formal participation of Third Countries in I3 was allowed. However I3 were not able to apply for supporting funding through the International Cooperation Activities. This restriction should be removed in FP7.

Access to Infrastructures is restricted to scientists working in EU countries and Associated States. A small proportion of the Access could be made available to scientists, particularly young scientists, from less developed countries. This proposal is not entirely charitable. In some areas, e.g. biodiversity, the EU has much to gain by building stronger working links with these countries.

Proposal: I3 should be permitted to apply for supporting funding through International Cooperation Activities. Participation by scientists from less developed countries in I3 Access Activities should be permitted at a level of up to 10%.

1.8 Interactions between I3 and with other Framework Programme Activities

In FP6 the possibilities for joint I3 activities, or for links to other FP6 programmes (e.g. Information Science and Technology) were limited. We would suggest that mechanisms should be put in place in FP7 so that joint activities, e.g. Joint Research Activities or Networking Activities involving two or more I3, would be encouraged in order to exploit the synergies that exist between different types of research infrastructure.

The Commission should establish a 'Round Table' of I3, following the successful earlier model of infrastructure Round Tables which themselves developed into I3. The I3 Round Table would act as a forum for the majority of infrastructures in Europe which have no common platform, but many common needs, and as a mechanism for dialogue with the Commission concerning the operation of the FP and the development of the ERA.

Proposal: More flexible mechanisms should be put in place to encourage interactions between I3, and with other relevant parts of the Framework Programme. The Commission should establish a 'Round Table' of I3 coordinators.

1.9 Funding of I3

If the rules for construction projects were relaxed (see section 2), and the demand therefore increased, it might be necessary to 'separate' the funding given for access and other I3 activities. If the Commission is supporting infrastructure development, then clearly it wants to ensure that European users can then benefit. Following the experience of FP6, the budget I3 requirements for I3 should be predictable.

Proposal: The budget for I3 should be kept separate from that for Construction and Design Projects.

2. Design Studies and Construction of New Infrastructures.

2.1 General Aspects

The inclusion of construction and design studies within FP6 has been welcomed as an EU contribution to the investment in infrastructures, rather than just in their use. However the budget, in particular that related to construction projects, is too small to have any real impact.

Proposal: The budget for Design Studies and Construction of New Infrastructures in FP7 should be substantially increased, in addition to exploiting the possibilities of Structural Funds, the European Investment Bank etc.

2.2 Design Studies

Design Studies offer an excellent opportunity for European cooperation in developing the research infrastructures of the future and keeping the ERA competitive. It is important that this continues to be a 'bottom-up' process.

Proposal: Design Studies should continue into FP7 on a similar basis to FP6, but with an increased overall budget.

2.3 Construction of New Infrastructures

The rules for construction projects in FP6 are so restrictive as to effectively disqualify many very important infrastructure development projects. These rules should be significantly relaxed, and should specifically include ongoing upgrade projects where the investment from other sources may be significant, but may fall outside of the period of a single FP. The importance of a particular infrastructure development in a European context must be the most important criterion.

There is considerable concern about the role that regional funding, or other funding mechanisms, may have in determining the future construction of new infrastructures. We recognize that large scientific infrastructures can have a significant economic benefit for an area. However, decisions on their construction must be made on the basis of the scientific needs of the ERA. There should not be a proliferation of infrastructures of local significance for which there might be no effective user base, when the priority should be for those infrastructures of far-reaching importance, which are meaningful in the general context of the construction of the ERA.

In this respect the concept of a European Road Map for research infrastructures is welcomed, as long as it is developed through a process that is transparent and based on appropriate criteria, e.g. scientific need and significance on a European scale. If ESFRI (or any similar body) is to take on this role then it needs to delegate much of the task to working groups that have the necessary scientific expertise and will consult sufficiently widely. The I3 should clearly play a role in providing specialist information or advice for ESFRI concerning specific classes of infrastructure, though we recognize that ESFRI should also seek other 'independent' advice. It is extremely important that I3, and the communities of research infrastructure users that they represent, are kept informed of the activities of ESFRI. This could be very effectively achieved by a suitable contact point between ESFRI and an I3 Round Table.

Proposal: If infrastructure construction projects in FP7 are to continue to be a bottom-up activity then the eligibility rules must be significantly relaxed. If they become a top-down activity, with prioritization through a European Road Map for Research Infrastructures, then the process for developing this Road Map needs to be transparent and based on scientific criteria. In either case a significant increase in the budget available for this activity is necessary.