

Brussels, 16 July 2010

**Meeting of Research Ministers in Brussels:  
Simplify the European research programmes and trust researchers.**

Simplification is a number one concern of companies and the scientific community towards the European research policy. Both researchers and companies – big and small ones – decide today to give up the introduction of dossiers to the Framework Programme because of the heaviness of procedures. Certain researchers affirm that they spend over half their time writing up files or filling in forms or, indeed, completing reports.

Consequence: The participation of the industrial world to European research programmes is flagging, particularly as far as SME are concerned, and this phenomenon is also threatening universities.

The Belgian EU Presidency therefore made of simplification one of its priorities in the field of Research and has brought this theme on the agenda of the informal meeting of Research Ministers, presided by Benoît Cerexhe, in Brussels, on 16 July.

The Ministers have deemed it right to seek a new balance between the requirement of healthy public funds management and the confidence researchers legitimately deserve.

Minister Benoît Cerexhe considers that “Simplification is one of the ways to strengthen the trust we place in our researchers.”

The European Ministers have also stressed that it is necessary to take into account the notion of risk and uncertainty inherent to all research. That’s why the transition from an approach based on costs towards an approach based on results requires a very careful examination. Before moving forward on this path, an appropriate definition of what the notion of results in the field of research means, is absolutely necessary. This definition must be established in agreement with the operators and the beneficiaries. A too narrow vision of the notion of results could in fact lead to privileging less risky projects, in detriment of advanced research and innovation. On the contrary, the criterion of scientific excellence has to remain the central focus while evaluating the results.

The Ministers have stressed that simplification should be embedded in a perspective of readability, coherence and stability of rules.

Furthermore the Ministers have raised the question of the possible introduction of « lump sums » for the funding of research projects. The transition towards a system of lump sums could be taken in consideration, even if it doesn't necessarily appear to be generalizable. It may represent an option, in so far that the lump sums are as near as possible to the real costs and in accordance with the national calculation mode in force. Moreover it's necessary to differentiate the approach in function of the type of beneficiary (university, research centre, small or big company,).

Finally, the Ministers expressed their preference for a significant reduction of the number of existing European instruments.

Besides these simplification measures in view of 2014, a consensus between Ministers has been reached about several European Commission proposals which could be adopted in the short term, without needing to modify the existing rules. Among these there is the issue of acceptable risk error with regard to European funding of research. It's about defining a new equilibrium between the error rate inherent to projects and the heaviness of controls. Therefore the tolerable risk of error could increase from 2 to 3.5%.

Other measures in the short term: cancellation of interest bearing accounts, the consideration of national bookkeeping practices, or still, every opportunity to even more speed up procedures. It could at last be useful to appoint an intermediary to have a uniform interpretation of European rules in the field of research.