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Simple is Beautiful: Eliminating Administrative Obstacles to Research

The ERC is now experimenting with a profound simplification of its funding procedure, and it is thus setting an example for all European research institutions. They should seek to eliminate administrative obstacles to research by systematically assessing the total cost of administrative procedures, by carefully weighing their cost against their benefit, and by exploring sweeping procedural simplifications whenever possible. Adopting a culture of radical simplification would be a decisive contribution to the competitiveness and attractiveness of European research.

For the first time, the ERC is experimenting with a new funding scheme, “lump sum funding”, aimed at greatly reducing reporting obligations. As the ERC writes, this mechanism “should reduce administrative work for grantees and their host institutions” because “there will be no financial accounting, no cost claims, no time sheets (...) and no financial audits. The lump sum will be awarded on the basis of a budget that will need to be well explained and justified in the proposal, but expenditures will then not be controlled once the grant agreement has been signed.”¹ Since the first call for projects allowing for this funding scheme only recently closed, it is too early to assess the success of this reform. But the ERC should be lauded for seeking to reduce administrative work for researchers and host institutions.

Excessively bureaucratic administration is a perennial issue. In 2010, an influential petition (with more than 13,000 signatures), “Trust Researchers”, noted that “European researchers face many red tape and cumbersome financial regulations”, and asked that research “be funded in recognition of the nature of research”, not as “procurement processes for any goods”.² The ERC’s original emphasis on risk-taking as well as its recent push to simplify procedures are in part responses to these worries.

But within European research, much progress still has to be made. A 2018 survey by the Young Academy of Europe found that excessive administration was one of the main concerns of its members, and that even they spent 19% of their time on administration, compared to just 30% on research.³ More recently, an ex-post evaluation of Horizon Europe found that administrative and transaction costs “represent between 12% to 19% of total budget”.⁴

¹ <https://erc.europa.eu/news-events/news/lump-sums-advanced-grants-2024>

² <http://web.archive.org/web/20121025114217/http://www.trust-researchers.eu/index.php?file=background.htm>

³ http://yacadeuro.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/YAE_Survey_analysis.pdf

⁴ See *Align Act Accelerate. Research, Technology and Innovation to boost European Competitiveness*, European Commission Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, p. 89 <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/2f9fc221-86bb-11ef-a67d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>



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Not everything has been moving in the right direction. In 2023, researchers of France's highly respected national research institution, CNRS, wrote a petition (with more than 4,000 signatures) asking that CNRS eliminate a newly introduced automated procedure for mission reporting; the latter was not just multiply dysfunctional, but it also transferred some of the reporting work from administrative staff to researchers (some simplifications were later made thanks to regulatory changes).⁵

Europe is keenly aware that its future depends in part on the attractiveness and competitiveness of its research. Funding is of the essence, as was recently emphasized by the Draghi report, which called for a doubling of the ERC budget. But simplification is essential as well, as was also mentioned in the Draghi report⁶. More recently, its importance was further highlighted by the report *Act, Align, Accelerate*, which called for a "radical simplification" of funding procedures, an acceptance of "responsible risk in return for reduced administrative burden and transaction costs" and a transition of "the application system to *trust first/evaluate later*".⁷ The ERC's attempts in this direction should be part of a more general change of philosophy throughout Europe.

We propose a three-step approach: 1) administrative costs should be comprehensively assessed, 2) they should be proportionate to their actual benefits, and 3) whenever possible, they should be radically reduced.

Comprehensive and transparent assessment of administrative procedures is the first step. The time and money spent by all parties on any administrative procedure should be assessed. If project management requires x_1 hours of PI time, x_2 hours of project member time, x_3 hours of staff time at the PI's home institution, and x_4 additional hours on the part of the funding institution,

⁵Petition: https://www.change.org/p/cnrs-nouveau-syst%C3%A8me-de-gestion-des-missions-on-n-en-peut-plus?recruiter=1318089870&recruited_by_id=0d709a50-639e-11ee-8ebc-a9aa6fc0ca7b&utm_source=share_petition&utm_campaign=share_petition&utm_medium=copylink&utm_content=cl_sharecopy_37675150_fr-FR%3A5

Regulatory changes: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000049894058>

Broader and earlier discussion by the Scientific Council of CNRS:

https://www.cnrs.fr/comitenational/cs/recommandations/Rapport_Entraves_vf.pdf

⁶ The future of European competitiveness Part B | In-depth analysis and recommendations

https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/ec1409c1-d4b4-4882-8bdd-3519f86bbb92_en?filename=The%20future%20of%20European%20competitiveness_%20In-depth%20analysis%20and%20recommendations_0.pdf

Doubling the ERC budget, p. 250

Simplifying procedures of Horizon Europe, p. 250: "Administrative requirements and tender procedures should be reformed to facilitate applicants' access and reduce the administrative burden for both beneficiaries and administrators"

⁷ *Align Act Accelerate. Research, Technology and Innovation to boost European Competitiveness*, European Commission Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, p. 8, Recommendation 9.



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all of these variables must be taken into account and assessed, keeping in mind that researcher time devoted to administration will not be devoted to research—a clearly undesirable outcome. The results of this assessment should be made public.

Careful weighing of the cost/benefit ratio of administrative burdens is the second step. For instance, if procedures are aimed at preventing fraud that is in actuality nearly non-existent, they are wasteful and thus counterproductive, and the principle *trust first/evaluate later* should be used instead. All too often, administrative burdens are increased in response to singular and exceptional events, and while preventing fraud or misconduct is important, so is the price we pay—especially if their cost/benefit is steeply negative.

Radical simplification of administrative and control procedures is the last step. Research institutions should emulate the ERC's recent example and experiment with and eventually adopt appropriate simplifications across the board, thus increasing the attractiveness and competitiveness of European research. Attempted simplifications should be assessed as well, and modified as needed in view of the results.

For European research, funding is of the essence, but simplification of the procedures is a crucial part of the equation, too.