

European and External Affairs Committee

EUR(3)-15-10-p3
9 November 2010

Written Submission from Aberystwyth University

Purpose

This briefing paper is provided by Aberystwyth University (AU) in response to an invitation dated 15/10/10 to provide evidence as part of the European and External Affairs Committee's (EEAC) inquiry into Welsh participation in European Union (EU) research, innovation and lifelong learning programmes for the period 2007-2013.

With reference to the issues suggested in the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, this paper:

- provides an overview of how Aberystwyth University is participating in the various EU programmes under consideration
- refers in general terms to experience of coordinating/participating in big FP projects and working in partnership with academic and business partners.
- indicates both what AU considers to be positive and what is challenging, as regards participation in the programmes of relevance to AU that fall within the scope of the inquiry, and suggests some recommendations for the EEAC's consideration.

Background

The constituent departments and institutes of Aberystwyth University, including the Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences (IBERS), which incorporates the former Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research (IGER), have participated in two of the EU programmes under consideration in this inquiry since their inception:

- i) Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP)
- ii) Framework Programme (FP)

i) LLP

Most, if not all of the Higher Education Institutes (HEI) in the United Kingdom (UK) offer the opportunity to study abroad under the Erasmus scheme. Some HEIs, including AU, also participate in the Erasmus Mundus programme. In terms of institutional Erasmus partners, we currently have 80 current partnerships (these include student and staff mobility), with most of these in Germany (18) and France and Spain level-pegging on 10. However, we do have a diverse range of partners ranging from 4 in Poland, 1 in Malta and 4 in Ireland.

Please see below a table of our outgoing students (both work & study placements):

Year	Exchange out
2008/09	48
2009/10	44
2010/11	89

Aberystwyth University maintains high levels of satisfaction amongst students involved in the LLP schemes, as indicated by results of a recent International Student Barometer surveys

<http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/undergrad/accolades/recent-accolades/top-isb-survey/>

In terms of the level and type of participation by organisations from Wales compared with other parts of the UK, and in terms of UK/EU averages, please see below a table for the number of students participating in Erasmus from Welsh HEI's:

	Exchange out (Wales)	Exchange out (UK)	Exchange in (UK)
2008/09	380	10,826	20,851
2009/10	380	Figures not yet released	Figures not yet released
2010/11	442		

(figures from the last 2 columns from

<http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc/stat/table109.pdf> - 19/10/10)

European students seem to be much more mobile than our home students. There are many contributing factors to this but even those from the EU who study in Wales are much more eager to go abroad than our UK students.

One of the main barriers to participation and a challenge faced by most HEI's in the UK at the moment is the Erasmus fee waiver. A document produced by Student Finance Wales notes that *'new system students who spend a full academic year abroad under the ERASMUS scheme should not be charged tuition fees by their host institution and are not eligible for a tuition fee loan'*. This is very difficult to maintain as this year, there is approximately a £250,000 shortfall in Wales. There are discussions, however, that the tuition fee waiver will be capped for the next academic year to avoid future shortfalls. This is likely to affect the number of students wishing to participate in Erasmus, particularly those who study European Languages as they normally study for a 4-year degree.

As the above table shows, it is a general pattern that the UK receives more students under Erasmus than we send out on exchange. We must ask: do we try to increase our outgoing numbers to match the

incoming ones or put a cap on the incoming exchange numbers until our own figures show an increase?

It is unlikely that most of the HEI's involved in any of the Erasmus programmes in the UK could run it without funding from both the British Council and Funding Councils. The various mobility grants from the British Council are extremely important to any Erasmus scheme as we also receive an Organisation of Mobility grant. This budget is for the University to use at its discretion and is a key factor in enhancing the student experience of the incoming exchange students. It is also useful in promoting the Erasmus scheme and raising awareness amongst our home students.

ii) Framework Programme (FP)

The EEAC will be aware that the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) is structured into 6 specific programmes each with differing administrative requirements, with 4 of them accessible to AU. The table below indicates the number of projects currently supported at AU per programme:

<i>Programme</i>	<i>Number of projects supported as at 22/10/10</i>	<i>Total financial contribution</i>	<i>% of total</i>
Cooperation (Collaborative Projects)	18	£5,744,645	60.5
Ideas (European Research Council)	2	£1,451,049	20.8
People (includes Marie Curie Actions)	5	£1,973,275	15.2
Capacities	1	£328,122	3.5
Totals	26	£9,497,091	

AU is ineligible for the Joint Research Council (JRC) and Euratom programmes.

Probably on account of the high degree of synergy that exists between AU's research strengths, the Assembly's priority areas for research, and the EU's thematic 'grand challenges', the level of support from FP is at its highest ever, and this is likely to increase as a) researchers seek out alternatives to UK research council funding, b) as the implications of the European Research Area (ERA) become more obvious, c) as experienced is shared with researchers from the former IGER who accessed proportionately more FP funding under previous forms of the FP, and d) the University has appointed an officer for the period July

2009 – June 2012 to provide encouragement, advice and assistance to academics when applying.

The Committee, in its invitation, has indicated its particular interest in hearing about experience of participating in the ‘Cooperation’ programme, which accounts for approximately 67% of the funds apportioned to FP7.

The Collaboration Programme, uniquely within FP7, is extremely prescriptive in its approach, and invites international and inter-sectoral consortia to bid for a one-off research tender, under one of ten themes, usually in July of each year with closing dates between October and January.

The unique nature and eligibility requirements of the opportunities means that applications can not be re-submitted in subsequent years, and are only of relevance to more established researchers, with a light Autumn term teaching burden, and with links with other experts in their fields both in academia and industry elsewhere across the EU.

The programme evaluators require highly detailed applications, usually submitted in a single stage, and applications typically run to over 100 pages. Participants in consortia state that they spend at least 2 weeks in terms of time contributing to the development of proposals, with co-ordinators/leaders of proposals investing over 4 weeks of their time, though this is reduced with the support of experienced advisory and administrative staff.

Where documentation about the up-and-coming calls has been made available in advance (usually through a contact abroad as UK National Contact Points are reluctant to release information early), it is possible to gain a head-start and attract the best possible partners to consortia.

With regard to financial aspects in the framework programme, the percentage of the full economic costs recovered is insufficient to allow institutions to invest in supporting EU funded research and AU questions its sustainability. There is only very limited external support, about £100k annually for the whole of Wales, through the Wales European Collaboration Fund (WECF) administered by the Wales European Enterprise Network (WEEN), for the convoluted application process for participating in framework programme collaborative projects, and consequently, proposal building becomes a burden on internal resources. This lack of support creates a disincentive to participate as a leader of consortia even though it may ultimately be financially more rewarding to do so: 80% of costs recovered as a leader as opposed to 65% typically if just as a participant. It should also be borne in mind that in comparison to the previous FPs, VAT is not

recoverable within FP7, and this immediately adds to the financial burden of participating institutions.

Proposals are frequently submitted by consortia that have not, due to lack of resources, been able to conduct face-to-face meetings. The Wales Higher Education Brussels Office is a useful facility for consortia that can afford to meet.

Typically, only one in eight applications under this programme are successful across the EU according to the United Kingdom Research Office (UKRO).

Even with a successful application, it takes about 6 months of negotiations with the EU prior to the commencement of funding, so, typically, more than 14 months of support will have been provided by the researching institution to the application prior to awards being transferred.

These factors make the Collaboration Programme seem unattractive for all but the most experienced and determined AU academics, and are likely to be appeal even less to the University's spin-out companies and other Wales based SMEs with less support capacity.

AU enjoyed a 50% success rate in the last round of calls, with biosciences/Knowledge Based Bio-Economy (KBBE) being the most successful theme.

The involvement with the FP7 Collaborative projects benefits AU in terms of raising the organisation's profile as a world-class research institution, helping to attract additional funding from other sources, drawing in exceptional researchers, creating new highly skilled jobs, and generating research that can then be utilised in wealth creation. Even when applications are unsuccessful, research questions generated in the consortia are generally re-used when applied to other funding sources, and contacts made can be potentially useful for the next round of calls.

Summary / Recommendations

1. AU is eager to see greater synergy and collaboration between Wales, UK and EU programmes as
 - This provides a clearer focus for targetting resources to meet the grand challenges of our time
 - Promotes a single European market in research and innovation
 - Promotes the breaking down of silos within administrative and monitoring structures
 - Promotes the process of smart specialisation ('playing to strengths') within regions, including greater collaboration with other HEIs such as the Aber Bangor Partnership.

2. AU would welcome, in the interest of greater cohesion and efficiency, a greater proportion of FP funding being targetted at Convergence areas through a synergy of the complimentary aspects of FP7 Capacities programme and structural funds.

3. While AU feels that the need to spread the EU contributions across international boundaries within the Collaborative Project and People (Industry Academia Pathways) is vital to support cohesion, this can sometimes discourage partnerships across the academia/industry divide within individual member states. AU would particularly like to see the new FP8 eliminate this barrier to innovation, especially when considering small and medium sized collaborative projects and within convergence areas.

4. AU is aware of the challenges facing SMEs while involving themselves in the FP are even greater than for academia, and would be keen to engage more with the development of clusters and/or through sharing its experience of gaining FP funding, subject to a) state aid issues being addressed b) collaboration and support from the European Enterprise Network.

5. AU believes that a new FP should be characterised by a few, clear rules being consistently and fairly applied. To this end, we would encourage a) all Directorates involved with FP7 to examine similarities and differences between the administration of their respective fields of interest/elements of FP7, with a view to identifying good practice and simplifying both the application process, and the monitoring of awards, within FP8; also, b) we would encourage the new FP administrators to release early drafts of collaborative call texts through National Contact Points to enable more time to construct the best possible consortia and encourage SME involvement.

6. AU would particularly welcome greater use of two-stage applications as we believe that a) the resulting efficiency savings to the EU's evaluation arrangements would be significant, and b) in order to decrease the financial burden of applicants who have to meet the significant costs of preparing highly detailed, single stage, but nonetheless, speculative applications.

7. AU would welcome an expansion of the use of lump sum/flat rate funding, wherever appropriate across all FP7 funding strands.

8. The amount of support to access FP funds varies enormously across the countries and regions of Europe. The support provided through regionally based advisors who a) promote uptake to SMEs interested in FP7 in Germany and b) who influence the development of FP8 in English regions bordering Wales (North West England, West Midlands

and South West) to benefit institutions based there could provide useful lessons for Wales.

9. In Wales, while the Wales European Funding Office is available to provide a great deal of support for accessing structural funds, the Wales European Enterprise Network is greatly limited in its capacity, due to budgetary reasons, to provide support to access the Framework Programme. At a time when structural fund support is likely to be scaled down in Wales, AU would welcome a greater focus on FP.

Ends