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Commentary

## An Academic in the Europe of Knowledge

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## Abstract

The challenges and opportunities of the Europe of Knowledge run alongside the competing requirements of peer review and regular ‘research assessments’ for many academics, not least in the UK. In this personal reflection, Julie Smith considers the impact of the Europe of Knowledge on research for social scientists and how its requirements fit with a need to demonstrate excellence and impact both in academic and practical terms. She notes that there is often a tension between attempts to deliver ‘excellence’ and ‘impact’, even within a context where both these concepts and the broader idea of ‘knowledge’ are difficult to measure. On balance, researchers are increasingly integrated into European networks and aspire to excellence but the constraints of funding, both nationally and at the EU level, mean that blue-skies research is not often possible.

## Keywords

Europe of Knowledge; excellence; impact; international networks; research funding

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*Par ma foi! Il y a plus de quarante ans que je dis de la prose sans que j'en susse rien.* M. Jourdain in Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, Act II, Scene IV

‘Am I an academic in the Europe of Knowledge?’ It seems that I am. Was I aware that I was an academic in the Europe of Knowledge when I was asked to write this reflection piece? To be honest, the answer is “No”. Like many of the practitioners I have interviewed over the years for my own research I suppose I have focused rather narrowly on my own daily work, not considering it in context as part of a wider whole, other than in the rather conventional sense of endeavouring to ensure that one’s writing takes into consideration all the relevant *acquis académique*. For a scholar of the institutions of the European Union (EU) and democracy within the Union, this is no inconsiderable task in itself given the burgeoning amount of literature that has been produced alongside the ever-changing institutional order. Just as a sometime Deputy Permanent Representative in the UK Permanent Representation to the EU once expressed considerable scepticism about why I would be remotely interested in her daily activities, which seemed to her simply to involve getting up, going to work and going home, I was surprised at the idea that anyone, other than an anthropologist, would be studying what academics do. The simple answer was precisely because she was “networked”, an integral part of the decision-making processes in the Council of the European Union, and I was studying the UK’s bilateral and small group cooperation within the EU. (Of course such puzzlement is not something that normally affects politicians - the usual focus of my research - who are generally secure in their belief that they are naturally a source of as much fascination for others as they are for themselves.)

Apart from *studying* networks, even if not quite defined as such at the time, I found myself increasingly *involved in* international academic networks. In my youthful arrogance, it did not initially occur to me to consider why “Cambridge” was asked to participate in such collective enterprises, or even to realise that this was a new, or at least evolving, phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> As a new academic, I just assumed that was how scholars of the European Union functioned, cooperating across borders, as the founding fathers might have expected, and that it was my personal expertise that was being sought. Since my own area of study covered the relationships between national actors at different levels, an understanding of other Member States was essential to my research. The chance to work with colleagues from across

the Union thus had considerable intellectual appeal; there was a real incentive to cooperate, just as the European Commission had hoped. Thus began my involvement in a whole series of acronyms, mostly funded by the European Union, as we participated in CONVEU-30, CONSENT, MERCURY, INCOOP, OPAL, Theseus, Pegasus and Exact, not to mention the UACES Collaborative Research Network on the European Research Area (ERA-CRN) which led to this Special Issue, and, most recently, Pademia.<sup>2</sup> Some of the multi-national collaborations were outside formal EU processes, yet all were distinctly “European”.

As Mitchell Young (2015) points out, multi-annual framework research funding at the European level goes back to 1984. Looking back, all of my acronym-laden networks and projects, with the exception of OPAL and the ERA-CRN, slotted neatly into the framework of another area of my own research: the EU budget and multi-annual financial framework (MFF). This is perhaps not surprising given that the EU’s framework research programmes have been funded from the EU budget agreed in the MFFs, albeit with some typically required local ‘co-funding’. Thus the CONSENT Network of Excellence was part of Framework Programme Six (FP6), which coincided with the 2000-06 MFF, while INCOOP, a Marie-Curie Initial Training Network, and MERCURY were both part of FP7, which ran alongside the 2007-13 MFF, and the ever-growing Pademia network on Parliamentary Democracy in Europe was funded in the dying days of that multi-annual framework. As I write, academics, myself included, are penning proposals for new research projects and PhD training networks via the rather more ambitiously named Horizon 2020, funded in the framework of the 2014-2020 EU MFF agreed in late 2013. Yet, like the framework packages that preceded it, Horizon 2020 is time-limited and dependent on the wishes of the EU Member States (MS) and institutions. In this case it is perhaps also vulnerable to the proposal to review the MFF in 2016, a new departure that is intended to increase the democratic accountability of the Union and ensure that MEPs elected in 2014 are able to exert an imprint on the Union’s budgetary arrangements, which would otherwise fall entirely outside the term of the current five-year parliament.<sup>3</sup> This could potentially cause chaos for researchers and higher education institutions, which rely on the EU for a significant percentage of their funding.

## NETWORKS OF ACADEMICS NEW AND OLD

As the names of the calls within which these EU projects have been conducted imply, there is a focus on networking. For EU institutions this is not a simple intention to fund “excellence” in research as national funding councils might seek to do. Significant emphasis is placed on networking itself. For young researchers, this is expected to take place in tandem with a solid grounding in research methods and, ideally, will lead to a doctorate. Yet, this last feature is not a prerequisite of funding – no final tranche of Marie-Curie Initial (now Innovative) Training Network funding is held back from host institutions if the early stage researchers (as they are known) fail to complete their PhDs. As long as the relevant institutions have ensured that training has been delivered and, crucially, that their protégés have been “networked”, the ITN is deemed a success. Of course, PhD candidates do not all complete their theses and certainly do not all complete on time, regardless of the funding arrangements in place or the requirements of their funders, but at least in the UK the government-funded research councils do impose targets for completions. That the EU does not do so is both a strength and a weakness: if the EU were to act like national funding bodies, this might represent a move towards greater excellence in a narrow sense (at least in terms of higher and swifter completion rates) but perhaps at the expense of allowing students to explore ideas and go off at tangents thanks to opportunities arising from the network; thus, it could pave the way to higher rates of completion but less engagement with the networked community and, hence, fewer long-term benefits. Certainly, the UK HE sector believes there are benefits accruing to collaboration for its own sake.<sup>4</sup>

Networking is also a crucial component of other funding initiatives within the EU, as academics are encouraged to collaborate with partners from other EU Member States. Calls for funding typically

make explicit the geographical spread they seek to encompass, with a small core of institutions (research institutes, think tanks and universities) from “old Europe”—in this case the founding Member States and those that joined in the 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s—never seen as sufficient. Rather, it is essential to reach out to North, East and South/South-East Member States, including at times even to non-member states, reflecting the moves in FP7, to encourage collaboration with third countries such as India and China.<sup>5</sup> Thus, as its protagonists hoped, EU research funding can be seen to foster European integration as academic departments gradually look to their contacts in other European states in order to create appropriate consortia that will press the right buttons to secure much sought-after research grants. Such networks **do** have the tangible advantage of ensuring that academics increasingly get to know their colleagues in other European states (and occasionally third countries, when the rules of the game permit or even encourage participation from outside the EU) even if the reality at times does seem to resemble David Lodge’s *Small World* with frequent travel to different countries and conferences where one keeps meeting the same people.

There are clear benefits to scholars of European integration who have a research interest in sharing expertise with colleagues from other Member States, either through informal interactions in the margins of meetings or more formal collaborative ventures. Regular, institutionalised contact with research partners offers additional benefits regardless of academic discipline and can facilitate genuinely comparative pan-EU research. Thus, just as national governments find themselves better able to influence European policy and treaties if they have already developed strong links with partners in other Member States,<sup>6</sup> so academics who have already developed strong ties find it easier to work together subsequently. One learns the strengths and weaknesses of academic partners, both as individuals and institutionally. Some brilliant colleagues, particularly from small or new Member States, might be based in relatively poorly endowed institutions with little capacity to coordinate major research proposals or run them if the applications are successful. It is important to have them as part of a network/research consortium for the personal attributes they bring with them – and vital to those individuals to be able to participate in such networks as they provide resources that would often be unattainable at home, particularly for researchers in the natural sciences. The hope is that grant funding will enhance capacity building. However it remains essential to draw in other partners with an established record of applying for and administering grants. Thus, in the field of European Studies, the Universities of Cologne and Maastricht are attractive because of their well-developed research offices, which have honed EU grant applications to a fine art. It is also helpful to learn the strengths and weaknesses of individual colleagues. As in political life, so in academic networks, personal chemistry and professional respect are both conducive to effective collaboration. Knowing that you can rely on people to produce the goods, or “deliverables” in EU-parlance, is vital. Further, having networks on which to draw in advance of any calls for proposals from the EU or other funders such as the national research councils participating in the ORA makes the quest for research funds (and formalities of completing the application forms) that bit easier.

## FUNDING MATTERS

And if these hard-nosed issues matter in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, they are even more crucial in the natural sciences and engineering, given the huge infrastructure costs associated with certain types of research, which could not be adequately financed on a national basis. Thus, universities increasingly target resources on securing grants from the EU, especially through the European Research Council (ERC). The UK has been especially successful in securing ERC grants: it plays host to 23 per cent of the total ERC grants, compared to 14 per cent in Germany, the next largest recipient.<sup>7</sup> The clear advantage of the ERC over some of the earlier network programmes is that there is an obvious intention that the projects should result in cutting-edge research, without which the Union cannot hope to meet its economic aspirations, such as the desire to be the world’s leading

knowledge economy by 2020 (a commitment made within the framework of the now all-but-forgotten Lisbon agenda). Yet, if the costs of doing research in the scientific sphere are high, so are the costs of putting together outstanding proposals that stand any chance of being funded; thus, leading research institutions now provide seed-funding to enable researchers to meet and develop proposals. These sunk costs cannot be recouped directly, but are nonetheless seen as essential by Vice-Chancellors and others striving to ensure their staff are part of elite research projects and to improve the bottom line, assuming a good rate of success can be delivered. That universities should seek to change their modus operandi to secure funds makes sense to rational economic actors, as places of higher education and research undoubtedly are. Thus, one can identify a set of institutional arrangements emerging in response to the EU's funding streams, opening up a potential new furrow for "new institutionalists" to plough in their attempts to understand the process of European integration, this time in what is sometimes called the 'fifth freedom': of knowledge and innovation (see Ulnicane 2015).<sup>8</sup>

Yet, this raises a set of important questions for academics, politicians and those intermediaries: the bureaucrats. What results from European research funding? Are academics and universities just following the money, cutting our intellectual cloth to fit the measurements of the EU, or are we able to do something more creative, innovative and intellectually ambitious? Is there scope to generate knowledge in any meaningful way? Are we moving to a Europe of Knowledge? And do EU funding and the European Research Area actually enhance research outputs or merely ensure that the university bean-counters are kept happy while allowing academics the benefits of interesting travel?

In some areas there are clear and quantifiable answers. From an economic perspective, financial and employment-related data suggest that EU-level funding for research and development has a significant effect (see European Commission 2011). These data go beyond the networks of excellence and ITNs to include the full range of EU research funding tools that were in use before the decision to consolidate funds within the Horizon 2020 envelope and offer one way of measuring the value of EU funding in terms of two measures deployed by the EU institutions in framing the 2014-2020 MFF: "value for money" and "European added value" (EAV). Value for money is a straightforward idea known to the individual citizen as much as to international policy-makers and is something that clearly appears sensible: few politicians and fewer ordinary citizens are likely to favour the alternative: wasting money. EAV is a rather more contested concept, especially if the "added value" from funding something at the EU level does not bring dividends back to the member states in a consistent or quantifiable way. Thus, ideas of EAV in the area of European Development Aid being discussed in the run-up to the 2014-2020 MFF were not greeted enthusiastically by Treasury officials, since even if there were demonstrable EAV it would not cut the UK's spending in any way, which is was fixed at 0.7 per cent GNI;<sup>9</sup> the outcomes, of course, would have been enhanced by EAV, but this does not always persuade hard-nosed Treasury/Finance ministry officials of the benefits if they do not affect the bottom line. EAV in terms of EU R&D funding seems to offer rather more tangible benefits to the UK, which has seen significant financial rewards from participating in EU-funded projects. According to Universities UK, the UK secured more than £5 billion in Framework Programme 7 funding from 2007 to 2013. In 2013, the UK HE sector received £1.2 billion. The European Commission is, rightly, keen to stress the successes achieved by the ERC and its grant holders, and has done so in economic terms.<sup>10</sup> But surely there is more to excellence than its monetary value? As Ulnicane points out (2015), there is a long-standing tension between valuing research for its economic or social value (applied research) versus focusing on research for its own sake (pure research).

## MAKING AN IMPACT

For 21<sup>st</sup> Century academics there is inevitably a tension between on the one hand pursuing one's intellectual dreams - writing the book one has always wanted to write, making a crucial scientific breakthrough - and achieving the metrics against which all but the lucky few (those freed by

retirement or seniority) are measured. These include the following requirements: to publish widely in leading peer-reviewed journals, including references to anyone who has ever written in the field, leaving a woefully small amount of space left for the industrious researcher to include his or her own ideas and far less for the inclusion of interesting new empirical insights; to write monographs that may be similarly constrained or rushed out in time for the next research assessment exercise or promotion; to acquire research funding; and demonstrate that the resulting work has had “impact” in the real world as well as in academe. All of this militates against any “pure” (or even commonsensical) vision of research. The idea (and ideal) of the “lone researcher” still works for a few in the Arts and Humanities – philosophers and historians do not necessarily require collaborators or lavish research budgets: libraries and archives still tend to be collectively provided<sup>11</sup> and, as one of my economist friends put it, ‘I only need a computer and a pencil for my research.’ Such people do not actually need large research grants; they may not need grants at all to produce outstanding research. Yet, departmental or university expectations in some universities mean some academics are expected to apply for grants that they scarcely need in order to meet targets intended to help universities improve their bottom line, even if the *net* income from grants is actually rather small. This may distract researchers from work that could indeed be excellent as they are forced to devote time to finding ways to apply for grants, whether national or EU, that are increasingly tailored for large projects, not the lone researcher. Has anyone calculated the cost of “pure research foregone” against the net increase to the bottom line? (Or, put another way, time spent seeking money = thinking “space” foregone.) If not, perhaps someone should. The opportunity to apply for funds is welcome; an obligation to do so raises questions about academic freedom and the importance of leaving researchers to their own intellectual devices, which is more likely to lead to research excellence.

While ostensibly intended to ensure research excellence, there are times when the quest for money seems to become an end in itself – indeed it has been a contextual measure of success in the UK’s Research Excellence Framework (REF) – rather than a means to an end. Of course, natural scientists do need serious sums of money for their equipment, which individual universities are unlikely to be able to fund and hence there is a strong rationale to collaborate across borders: at the extreme, there is no need for multiple hadron colliders but there is a need for the quantum of R&D funding for one to exist. Yet there are problems here too. Even for those researchers who need cash to support their research environment, there is a built-in problem: are they applying for funding to enable them to do the research that they believe is necessary or desirable, or research that politicians or bureaucrats have decreed would be beneficial? If the latter, what does this mean for intellectual and academic integrity? It is perhaps worth noting that Nobel Laureate Peter Higgs doubts he could have made the same discovery in contemporary research as half a century ago ‘because of the expectations on academics to collaborate and keep churning out papers’ (Aitkenhead 2013).

Over the years, the various EU framework programmes and now Horizon 2020 have laid out guidelines for the sort of research that will be eligible for funding. As other authors in this Special Issue make clear, the criteria tend to focus on applied research and were initially not focused clearly on “excellence” despite the use of the word. Over time the requirements for funding have increasingly moved towards excellence, even if that term remains somewhat vague as Young (2015) argued. What is clear, however, is that funding is intended for applied rather than pure research.

## A UK PERSPECTIVE

At the national level, the UK funding councils, while technically independent from government, put out funding calls that at times seem to respond to the demands of the government of the day, reflecting a rather politicised approach to research funding. Thus the focus was on security and terrorism in the last decade under “New Labour”, while “the Big Society” and inequality, respectively issues in the Conservative and Liberal Democrat manifestos for the 2010 General Election, featured in

the ARHC and ESRC calls for proposals shortly after those two parties made their Coalition Agreement for government in May 2010. Little scope seemed to be left for researchers themselves to choose their preferred area of study aimed at pure rather than applied research. However, few put the choices as starkly as sometime Business Secretary in the Labour Government, Lord Mandelson did when he suggested that universities should plug financial black holes by ‘doing what they do best... focus more on practical training and science and engineering courses with links to industry’ (Tickle and Bowcott 2010).

We may therefore be moving to a paradoxical situation where there is both research and “knowledge” (*sapienza*) but where genuine blue-skies thinking and intellectual excellence are impossible for most researchers, as they must keep focus on meeting all these competing and sometimes contradictory demands placed upon them. This is not just the trade-off between pure and applied research that has been noted for decades but rather a difficulty arising from requirements to pursue both “impact”, understood as the effect on the policy-making, business or other non-academic sectors and scholarship, in the more traditional sense (by which I mean writing largely for other scholars). In the case of the UK, with its regular, and equally institutionalised, attempts to measure research excellence, academics face perhaps starker choices than in other European states.<sup>12</sup> Initiated in the 1980s as a way to ensure that the “dead wood” was removed from British universities, the now familiar research requirements (previously the Research Assessment Exercise and most recently the Research Excellence Framework) have become an everyday part of academic life in the UK but one with certain undesirable consequences for higher education more broadly. The downside of removing “dead wood” in the 1980s, by which was frequently meant those who had ceased undertaking published research, was the loss of some outstanding teachers; and the further institutionalisation of centralised research exercises means there is a disincentive for academics to focus on teaching excellence when promotion is predicated predominantly on research excellence. As one academic lawyer suggested to me, ‘Perhaps the pendulum has now swung too far.’ Academics need space to think and to innovate; the time that Peter Higgs fears has now been lost to modern academics. The time to research and write can be shoehorned into multi-annual funding and research assessment frameworks, but this may not be optimal. Academics are not journalists and generally did not come into the profession expecting to have to write to order. Certain research projects take many years and in some disciplines the length of time to get an article published runs into years, regardless of how brilliant the piece may be. The need to publish for the REF may thus impede the very excellence in research it seeks to bring about.

As with the criteria for securing funding in the ERA so domestically it is possible that the rules established and refined since the mid-1980s may not always deliver the excellence sought. The premium is on publishing in top journals or, in some disciplines, writing research monographs, yet at the same time, the REF and Research Councils expect “Impact”. Few practitioners will read the erudite and esoteric journals that meet the criteria set for research excellence in the REF, so how can impact be achieved? Must researchers then produce their findings in multiple forums in order to try to tick each and every box? And for what purpose?<sup>13</sup> Some of the hoops created in the 1980s may have had their day. Allowing researchers to focus on research and writing for their own sake might just allow for rather more creative outputs of greater relevance in the real world than requiring them to produce a set number of publications within a particular timeframe. And our academic colleagues in other countries would be greatly relieved if the publishing cycle were no longer distorted by the UK’s REF.

Oh, and I have a small confession to make: my first full-time job was a three-year temporary post as a Teaching Fellow in the History and Politics of European Integration made possible by the fact that an established colleague had secured a Jean Monnet Chair in Cambridge. It was thanks to his good fortune that I happened to be in Cambridge when the European Research Area came into being. I just did not realise it was happening at the time. Rather like M. Jourdain speaking prose, I have been in the Europe of Knowledge all along but without realising. How many others do likewise?



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## Note from the Editor

Julie Smith is a Fellow in Politics at Robinson College, Cambridge. Some of these ideas formed part of her maiden speech as a member of the House of Lords on 25<sup>th</sup> November 2014.

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<sup>1</sup> For it was the institutional label rather than my personal expertise or CV that was the pole of attraction for other academics in most cases. On occasion my colleagues and I were drawn in as academic “experts” to contribute to the intellectual offerings of other networks, where the requirement was to provide content rather than an institutional base, as a result of our particular research interests, at others it appeared almost as if there were a checklist of partner institutions, whose very presence in a network would help secure funding. Cambridge secured £52.8m in 2013-14, representing 13 per cent of its total research grant income.

<sup>2</sup> The ERA-CRN is funded by the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES) and OPAL, the Observatory of Parliaments after Lisbon, was funded as part of the Open Research Area by the national funding bodies of France, Germany and the Netherlands and by the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK (Research grant ES/I014853/1).

<sup>3</sup> This was made explicit in Article 2 of the Council Regulation laying down the Multiannual Financial Framework for the years 2014-2020: Brussels, 25 November 2013, 11791/7/13 REV 7 POLGEN 129 CADREFIN 170.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Universities UK and the Russell Group of 24 leading research universities both stress the importance of collaboration for research outcomes. Source: briefings from UUK and the Russell Group (2014).

<sup>5</sup> MERCURY, for example, included academic partners in China and South Africa.

<sup>6</sup> Tony Blair demonstrated this with his ‘New Bilateralism’, which inter alia led to the Lisbon Strategy that ran parallel to development the European Research Area from 2000 (see Smith and Tsatsas 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Information from Universities UK. This situation has been criticised by one anonymous academic who refers to EU funding as having “Robin Hood”-like qualities in reverse, precisely benefiting already well-endowed countries and institutions (see Anonymous Academic 2014).

<sup>8</sup> The extensive literature on institutionalism starts with March and Olsen (1983). Most recently the new institutionalist literature has been expanded by Vivien Schmidt (2010) who adds “discursive institutionalism” to historical, sociological and rational choice institutionalism.

<sup>9</sup> This observation comes from an off-the-record interview I conducted as part of the European Parliament study available as Smith et al. (2012).

<sup>10</sup> European Commission (2011), Annex p. 3

<sup>11</sup> Even here the situation is changing, however, as Historians are sometimes expected to request the costs of archiving the materials they wish to study into their grant applications.

<sup>12</sup> In the US the quest for tenure provides a similar framework for junior academics seeking a permanent place but the requirements are not life-long as in the UK.

<sup>13</sup> This issue is not unique to the UK, as one American academic’s frustration over the need to be “useful” was eloquently demonstrated in the *New York Times* (Conniff 2014).



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