The European Research Area and the University, Twenty Years On

What a Policy Framework Can and Cannot Do for Research Governance

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The European Research Area has been renewed, and its instruments are addressed to member states rather than to the universities that do most of the research. This article examines the gap between the framework and the institution: the four instruments through which European research policy reaches a university, the capacity that each of them requires, and the conditions under which a university can use a policy framework rather than be used by it. It argues that the university's leverage lies in the design of its own governance, not in its participation in European projects.

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1. A Framework Without a Subject

The European Research Area was proposed as a market for research: knowledge produced in one country should be usable in another, and the obstacles to that use should be removed. Twenty years of instruments later, the framework describes a great deal and governs almost nothing, because its addressee is the member state and its subject, the university, is not present in the document.

The absence has consequences. A framework that names member states produces instruments that a ministry can implement: a national strategy, a reporting obligation, a target. A university experiences these instruments as a reporting burden, and the burden is the main form in which European research policy is actually felt in a faculty.

A policy that names states is experienced by universities as paperwork

The question that follows is what a university can do with a framework that cannot address it. The answer is not to wait for the framework to acquire a subject. It is to identify which of the framework's instruments reach the institution, in what form, and what the institution must have in place to use them rather than to absorb them.

2. Four Channels

European research policy reaches a university through four channels, and they differ in what they require.

The first is funding, which arrives as a competitive project. The second is regulation, which arrives as a condition on the use of funds: a data management plan, an ethics review, an open access obligation. The third is infrastructure, which arrives as a facility that a country hosts and that researchers apply to use. The fourth is comparison, which arrives as a ranking or a set of indicators that a ministry uses in its negotiations with a rector.

The four channels require four different capacities: a research development office, a compliance function, a user relationship with the facility and a statistics function. Most universities have invested in the first and the second and have left the third and fourth to be managed by individual researchers, which is why the institution's experience of European policy is the experience of a project applicant.

3. Compliance as Capacity

The compliance conditions are usually described as a burden, and the description is accurate in its account of the hours and misleading in its account of the value.

An institution that has built a data management service, an ethics committee that meets weekly and a repository that meets the funder's requirements has acquired a capacity that improves its research independently of any funder. A team that writes a data management plan learns something about its own data. An ethics committee that reviews early prevents a problem that would otherwise be discovered by a journal.

The distinction that matters is whether the compliance function is designed as a service or as a gate. A gate produces forms that applicants complete to satisfy a requirement; a service produces a consultation

that changes the design of the project. The same regulation, implemented twice, produces two different institutions, and the choice between the two implementations is entirely local.

Channel	Form	Capacity needed
Funding	A competitive project	Research development
Regulation	Conditions on funds	A compliance service
Infrastructure	A shared facility	A user relationship
Comparison	Indicators	Statistics and interpretation

Table 1 Four channels and the capacity each requires

4. The Governance Question

The instrument that determines how European policy lands in a university is its own research governance, and the governance is usually a set of arrangements that grew rather than a design.

Three features of the design matter. The first is the level at which priorities are set: a university that sets its research priorities in a strategy document has a criterion for declining a call that it does not need; a university without priorities applies to every call and lets the funders define its portfolio. The second is the location of the research office: an office in the rectorate coordinates, an office in a faculty applies, and the difference determines whether the institution's projects form a portfolio.

The third is the presence of a research committee with a mandate to say no. The absence of such a committee is the most common defect in a university's research governance, because an institution that cannot decline a call cannot set a direction, and the accumulation of projects substitutes for a strategy.

5. The Comparative Layer

The comparative channel is the least discussed and it does the most to shape national policy, because the indicators that a ministry uses in its negotiations are the indicators that a university tries to move.

The problem is not the existence of indicators but their use outside the domain in which they are valid. A citation-based measure describes a literature; it does not describe a university's contribution to a region,

and a ministry that uses it to allocate a regional mission's funding is measuring something other than what it funds.

The response available to a university is documentation: a set of measures that describe what the institution does and that it publishes itself, so that the comparison by an external indicator is met by a description the institution controls. The practice is unglamorous, and it is the only defence against a metric that is chosen by someone else.

6. Using the Framework

A university that wants to use the framework rather than be used by it needs four things, and none of them requires a European instrument.

The first is a research strategy with enough specificity to decline a call. The second is a compliance service designed as a consultation rather than a gate. The third is a relationship with the shared facilities that its researchers use, negotiated by the institution rather than by individuals. The fourth is its own documentation, published and revised annually, so that the comparative layer meets a description rather than a silence.



Figure 1 From absorption to use

7. Conclusions

The European Research Area has given universities a set of instruments and no subject, and the consequence is that the institution's experience of it is the experience of an applicant. That is a governance problem, and its solution lies in the design of research governance at home.

Three conclusions follow. The channels through which the framework reaches a university require four distinct capacities, and the ones most neglected are the relationship with shared facilities and the interpretation of comparative indicators. The compliance function should be built as a service, since the same regulation produces a gate or a consultation according to a local decision. And a research strategy that cannot decline a call is not a strategy, which makes the mandate to say no the first instrument of institutional autonomy.

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Dace Ozola works on research governance and on the implementation of European policy in national systems at the University of Latvia.

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