Mission-oriented research can be a useful addition to the funding portfolio of national and EU research programmes, but it needs careful design to complement curiosity-driven research. This was one of the conclusions of the 10th Science Europe High-Level Workshop on 31 May in Madrid, hosted by the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) and the Spanish State Secretariat for Research, Development, and Innovation.

During the workshop, Heads of the Science Europe Member Organisations, researchers, representatives of national ministries and of the European Commission (EC) debated the rationale and implementation issues of mission-oriented research programmes.

One week ahead of the official release of the proposal for ‘Horizon Europe’, the next EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2021–2027), Signe Ratso, Deputy Director-General for Research and Innovation at the EC, confirmed that the programme would include a mission-oriented approach. She pointed out that the actual missions have not yet been defined and will not be part of the proposal that will be released on 7 June.

Missions in Horizon Europe will have a “dynamic budget allocation”, presumably meaning that budget per mission will not be defined before the entire mission, but rather per call. Missions are expected to be governed by what Ms Ratso called ‘Mission Boards’, which will aim to include all relevant stakeholders.

Given the potentially large budgets that could be allocated in mission-oriented fashion and the effects they could have on research systems, particular care needs to be given to the selection and evaluation mechanisms of missions in Horizon Europe.

“This High-Level Workshop should be considered the beginning of a series of debates that aims to strike a fair and fruitful combination between excellence and impact in science and innovation in Horizon Europe”, said Rosa Menéndez, President of CSIC.

Some Science Europe members have direct experience with similar approaches and can provide evidence-based advice on setting up such programmes. Issues that are crucial and that were illustrated during the workshop include the framing of calls in a way that allows for bottom-up responses to defined missions. Examples from the UK, Finland, Netherlands, France, and Sweden, among others, served to highlight such aspects.

Sharon Ellis, Director of International Research and Innovation in the UK Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, highlighted the fact that the mission-oriented approach cannot dominate the funding portfolio. Referring to a pyramid, she insisted on the need to fund and sustain a strong research and infrastructures base as a condition to successfully achieve the current and future missions.

Also important is the careful definition of the scientific contributions to a given mission so as not to generate counterproductive
Marc Schiltz, the President of Science Europe, pointed out that science alone cannot guarantee the success of a mission-oriented approach. He said that it will require support beyond the research sector to convert research results into effective actions.

Paul Verschure, Director of the SPECS lab at the Barcelona Institute of Science and Technology and Research Professor at the Catalan Institute of Advanced Studies, presented the view of the Sapiens 5.0 network, which includes the Max Planck Society. He spoke of the importance to define missions that address the real causes of today’s challenges and not just the symptoms. He also highlighted the importance of the human-behaviour factor in the problem.

In the coming months, Science Europe will develop concrete recommendations and a catalogue of issues that require special attention. It will use these to work closely together with the European Commission in defining the mechanism to support mission-oriented research in Horizon Europe.

Rosa Menéndez Elected as Vice-President of Science Europe

At the General Assembly in Madrid on 1 June, the members of Science Europe elected Rosa Menéndez, President of the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), to the position of Vice-President.

After her appointment on 1 June 2018, Rosa Menéndez thanked the assembled members of Science Europe for their support and expressed her eagerness to contribute in her new role and work with the Governing Board on guiding the association.

President Marc Schiltz said that he was very pleased with the election of Professor Menéndez: “The Governing Board and I very much look forward to working with her in the coming years to deliver the priorities and strategy that we have laid out for the organisation. We welcome the input and experience that Professor Menéndez will provide as President of one of Europe’s largest research performing organisations.”

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