

Open Discussion: Feedback on ERA-PG and discussion about ERA-CAPS

Chaired by Rowan McKibbin, BBSRC

(ERA-CAPS management comments in italics; Chair's comments preceded by RM)

Delegate List: Dorothea Bartels, Ruth Bastow, Gildas Bourdais, Lesley Ann Boyd, Rhoda Delventhal, Andy Flavell, Paul Fraser, Andrea Gust, Gerd Jürgens, Thomas Laux, Gerhard Leubner, Klaus Pillen, Christopher Ridout, Dierk Scheel, Daniel Schubert, Jens Steinbrenner, Franziska Turck, Ute Vothknecht, Tanya Waldie, Michael Wrzaczek, Slobodanka Radovic, Simona Radutoiu, Sibylle Grandel, Catherine Kistner, Paul Wiley, Rowan McKibbin, Theo Saat, Yuval Eshdat, Jane Silverthorne, Julio Barbas

General questions about how ERA-PG worked

1. What was beneficial about being funded through ERA-PG as opposed to a national programme?

Sharing of data and resources

The entire project was reviewed as a single entity

Collaborations were funded

EU bureaucracy was kept out

Brought in new collaborators who would not otherwise have worked together, or could even have been competitors

RM: ERA-Nets are extra work for funders over national programs so have to demonstrate added value

Focused on science and not a list of deliverables

Brings new opportunities and new ideas

RM: EC wanted new member states and ERA-CAPS has already brought in new countries with new expertise and resources. ERA-CAPS will be working to bring them in based on these attributes through surveys. In order to bring researchers together, in the longer term there will be a database, which will be up by the time of the second call. However, researchers often already know who is doing what. Might use an online forum on the intranet to bring people together.

Interdisciplinary projects became possible

2. Was there anything that was particularly unhelpful?

There was a black hole towards the end of the ERA-PG when the Netherlands coordination ended. People were confused about whether/when reports were due after the end of the coordination.

RM: The intention was to have the new ERA-Net start sooner. This wrap-up workshop is supported under the new ERA-Net. There will be two grant-holders' workshops during the three years of ERA-CAPS. The self-sustaining network should continue liaison with grant holders at the end of ERA-CAPS, and it is likely that there will still be a degree of coordination from the funding agencies, despite no longer receiving EC funding.

Theo Saat (NWO): The current participating organisations are not temporary (as was the case for the coordinating organisation, NGI, in ERA-PG) so you will not have to deal with changing foci as with NGI to NWO in the Netherlands.

Liked the hands off approach but not when it became no hands at the website.

If that was kept at a higher level, it would be better for the new ERA-Net.

RM: The Belgian partner in ERA-CAPS (FRS-FNRS) are in charge of the website, and to date are doing an excellent job. They are amenable to suggestions for additional functionality. They are already responding to suggestions from the most recent workshop.

Three years funding for projects might be a bit too short. Publications came out later. PhD students have to find other money to finish.

RM: Some agencies have flexibility but some can only fund 3 years. Having variable project durations impacts evaluation of the programme. A majority decision was taken by the ERA-CAPS partners to limit project durations to three years. Applicant will specify start date under the three year term.

SysMo shared best practices across labs like LIMS, student interactions, new tools, technologies, involving students and Postdocs.

RM: The joint calls will have an element of mobility across labs, and applicants are encouraged to include these in their proposals. ERA-CAPS will not do training workshops like ERASysBio and SysMo.

Workshops and on-line activities could promote links across projects not just within them.

RM: Workshops and networking sessions could be factored in on the sidelines of scientific conferences and at grantholders' workshops.

3. Joint calls: some things have to be done a certain way. However, what was difficult about the forms?

Liked the form. One form is really important.

RM: Submission will be a form to DFG, who will manage the calls, and coordinate the independent peer review process. However, for example in the UK, some information would also have to be uploaded into BBSRC system, but this will only be asked for if selected for funding. There may be similar requirements from the other partners.

GARNet liked the assessment based on the quality of science. All countries agree to peer review principles.

4. First call is broad and inclusive to maximize participation. Some common themes emerged at the first strategic workshop held in Tallinn in June. Open to suggestions for topics that funding agencies could support.

Can revised projects that fail in the first call be submitted to the second call?

RM: Hard to know. Would depend on reaction of some partners that might have specific rules. Will also depend on the call topics.

Will there be less money in the second call?

RM: Not necessarily.

The open call will bring a lot of proposals.

EU focuses on targeted research. An open call without strings allows the best possible projects to be selected.

RM: If the open call is successful, might use the same approach for the second one.

Are there some funders that would prefer focus topics?

RM: Yes, the information about these would be in the national annexes to the call text. However, the evaluation will be on quality of the science even if topics are highlighted. However, going down the ranked list, some projects might be able to access additional funding pots for specific topics if the original national funding commitment to the call has run out.

Does breadth include ecology?

Paul Wiley (BBSRC): ERA-CAPS is limited to molecular plant science. Any ecology project would need to have a strong molecular element.

Remove strings attached to the programme by the funders. For example, in ERA-PG Canada wanted to only fund brassica and it prevented a proposal being submitted.

RM: ERA-CAPS cannot tell funders how to spend their money, and so some partners will have restrictions. Researchers want to know about strings up front when planning projects. Most researchers know this information already but need to make sure that all consortium members are aware of the issues. For example, Norway wants more applied research. This would not impact the whole consortium but it might impact the Norwegian team's focus to get funded.

5. What other type of things can ERA-CAPS do to help? Facilitate networking? Early career researcher mobility? Information exchange?

Access to infrastructure?

RM: NWO looking at this in Work Package 4 (External Engagement and Data Management) and would add information to the database. We will add the proposal to the Publications section of the website (www.era-caps.org) if anyone wants to take a look at the detail of Work Package 4. Often facilities are required to offer services to the wider community. Talking with ELIXIR.

6. Involvement of industry is tricky. Some countries have funding restrictions. Is it important to have industry involved? Do the negatives outweigh the benefits?

There has previously been a push to have industry involved and has sometimes been complicated. Good but should not be a condition. Not many breeding companies available to partner. Involve when appropriate.

RM: ERA-CAPS won't impose it but might not be able to allow it, depending on the funding agency partners involved in a consortium.

Even involving one industrial partner can be an issue with delays due to legal requirements.

RM: Partners need to continue to discuss this more but we are hearing that it should be left up to the applicants. Need clarity about the possible mechanisms, rules for subcontractors regarding publications and credit - fee for service only. Different agencies have different rules.

7. MTAs, consortium agreements.

RM: ERA-CAPS will draft agreement templates for wider use beyond ERA-CAPS. Pierre Chilès (INRA) will set up a small working group to lead this. Feedback from ERA-PG was that these documents were useful.

It would be great if these were agreed by all the countries before release.

RM: Use of the documents would not be enforced but could be a useful starting point.

Will there be recommendations on open access for data?

RM: Theo Saat (NWO) is running a workshop on Wednesday that will discuss this issue. Depending on the outcomes, there may be some guidelines posted in time for the first call. If not, the second call. Will discuss meeting both national and ERA-CAPS policies. The goal is to promote access.

Will the change in RCUK (Research Councils UK) open access rules regarding publications have an impact on consortia including UK researchers?

RM: Yes, they will have to comply from 2014 onwards.

8. Other relevant information:

We are happy for researchers from non-partners to join provided they secure their own funding. There will be a minimum number of countries involved. Observers could count as one if providing funding. Don't want to exclude critical partners for the science.

A database will be provided to allow addition of personal information to find partners and networks.

The ERA-NET will be one further step towards joint programming. Will allow funded coordination around national priorities.

Hopefully, the secretariat will be found to be helpful and responsive. Check the web site (www.era-caps.org) and email questions (eracaps@bbsrc.ac.uk). Being supported by EC to do this.

Self-sustaining work package (WP5) starts later. Partners have been attending meetings with other ERA-Nets dealing with these issues. Will be the largest scale of any to do this. Will have to continue to support a secretariat. There will be no third tranche of support for ERA-CAPS from the EC unless something changes. ERA-Nets will be different under Horizon 2020 – currently it looks like they will be somewhere between what an ERA-Net and an ERA-Net+ are now.

What is an observer? Should applicants be thinking about forming networks with these countries?

RM: wait and see who contributes funding to the call – the details of this will be announced around September.

EC encourages one partner per country which is why Italy and France have observers and partners. EPSO cannot be a partner because it is not a funding agency. Surprised to get funds from the EC for Canada and New Zealand. Engaged US later so could not provide support. Observers cannot vote in management meetings, however, were they to contribute funds to a joint call, they would get as much say as the full partners.

What will be the weight of the national agencies in choice of projects?

RM: A panel of representatives from funders will review applications. Countries have to adhere to recommendations for the review panel. Moderating panel of funders then take recommendations and match funds to highly-ranked projects. Have to deal with demand versus available funds. Using same principles as with ERA-PG. Will remain open and transparent.