

EuroHESC Final Evaluation: Review Panel Statement

The Review Panel of the EuroHESC research programme has taken into account the fact that – for administrative reasons – the final evaluation of the programme had to be conducted prematurely. Moreover, the fruits of the programme may not be fully grasped for quite some time, as publications will continue to emerge and cooperation to develop long after the formal end of the programme.

Nevertheless, the Review Panel made use of the occasion of the final evaluation not only to consider the progress and accomplishments of the EuroHESC programme, but also to derive some formative conclusions – for comparative higher education research in particular but also for international research collaboration more broadly.

Progress in the Collaborative Research Projects

At the moment of writing, the Collaborative Research Projects (CRPs) – CINHEKS, EUROAC, RHESI and TRUE – are at rather different stages of completion, to some extent due to administrative obstacles in the initial stages. All CRPs had to contend with the complexities of the EUROCORES funding mechanism: not all partners in the original consortia received funding from their national funding body, while some received only partial funding, and so had to limit their participation; and the starting dates of the national components varied considerably, according to the timing of decisions in the participating funding organisations. The involvement of UK researchers, in particular, was restricted by funding limitations at national level. The UK team in the CINHEKS project was further curtailed by the closure of the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) in 2011.

Despite these challenges, progress toward CRP goals is largely on target, if not on schedule. It seems likely that research output for all CRPs will be substantial in terms of data production, publications and theoretical development. At the moment of the programme's 'Final Conference' in August 2012, however, most of the projects were still very much 'works in progress', and substantive, integrated findings were sparse.

The CRPs range from loosely coupled and fragmented to tightly organised and integrated teams, but all four provide evidence of integration and collaboration, especially at the level of joint scientific publications. The projects have managed their multidisciplinary and comparative international dimensions in creative ways. In several cases, bilateral collaborations within the multilateral forms of collaboration seem to have led to very productive forms of collaboration. Further, the CINHEKS project, in particular, has demonstrated that it is possible to utilise the huge advantages offered by digital technologies to enhance collaboration in academic work. All the CRPs should more actively utilise private and public web pages and ICT tools to facilitate their internal communication and public dissemination of results.

Programme integration

All four CRPs testify to the value of working not only in complex and integrated multi-disciplinary and multi-national research projects, but also within the framework of an integrative thematic programme, despite the additional level of administrative and organisational complexity this entailed.

The embedding of the CRPs in the broader EUROCORES programme was valuable in requiring collaboration *between* the CRPs and thereby stimulating reflection and internal coordination *within* the CRPs. The Project Leaders collaborated actively in the management of the programme. Many workshops, training courses and special sessions were initiated and organised by the CRPs, using the

shared networking and dissemination resources of the programme and frequently exploiting conferences of European-wide scientific associations like CHER or EGOS. Collaboration is also evident in terms of contact and networking between CRPs, although the fact that some research centres were involved in several CRPs did not seem to have an identifiable impact on integration or joint outputs so far.

However, on a more fundamental level, the theoretical frameworks of the discrete CRPs were not integrated, and the common knowledge acquired during the implementation of the programme was difficult to plough back into the CRPs in the three-year time-frame of the programme. There is significant potential in the future to integrate the findings and to exploit, share and combine the data gathered by the projects on different levels of higher education systems, e.g. organisation and individual level.

All in all, the added value of the programme for the CRPs was good and necessary.

Networking, training and dissemination

The resounding achievement of the programme was the cultivation of a new, networked generation of young researchers through numerous common training activities, workshops and special sessions, organised all over Europe and attended by a large number of the younger members of the CRPs. These activities undoubtedly served to overcome barriers and provide a much-needed occasion for young (and old) researchers to meet and interact.

Many of these relationships will have a long-term impact on higher education research, as the early-stage researchers use their newly established networks to develop joint projects and perspectives. An indication of their motivation and engagement is the critical involvement of EuroHESC project members in the creation of the Early-Career Higher Education Researchers' network (ECHER) during the CHER conference in 2011 and its launch at the CHER conference in September 2012. The development of interdisciplinary collaborative research may indeed best be supported by promoting the networking and training of early-stage researchers.

The experience of international teamwork challenges combined with the attempt to exploit ICT to enhance collaboration led to an important, truly cross-CRP collaborative project on international research team dynamics and ICT-based collaboration, the results of which will be highly relevant for the integration of ICT in future international research projects (see Hoffman et al. 2012).

A significant number of communications and publications have been produced or are underway. Most dissemination activities are still, however, centred on the higher education research community and its journals. It is critical to reach out beyond the higher education community to make the research and its implications more widely known. Building on the planned future collaboration, the CRPs should reap the opportunity to make a joint publication, preferably reaching towards wider academic and non-academic audiences.

As mentioned above, all the CRPs should more actively utilise the web and ICT tools for the (public) sharing of data, commonly developed survey instruments or other data-collecting tools and for the dissemination of results.

General conclusions and recommendations

Comparative research on higher education is absolutely essential in this era of social transformation, globalisation and internationalisation of higher education. The EuroHESC programme created a platform for international collaborative research on higher education that should be supported in its continuing efforts, at national and international level.

The combined results of the EuroHESC programme have the potential to provide important insights for future research and policy-making vis-à-vis higher education. The Panel would nevertheless like to highlight the absence of gender and equity thematics in the programme as a whole. Although these were not foci of the CRP proposals when they were selected, the Panel did encourage the projects to pay more attention to gender and equity issues at the outset of the programme, and again at the mid-term stage. The CRPs could still reflect on the implications of their data and findings for dimensions of higher education research not covered by the main foci of the projects, such as research on teaching and learning in higher education and issues such as class, ethnicity/race and gender.

Considering the fore-going comments, the Review Panel would strongly encourage the Project Leaders and Principal Investigators to continue the “after-work” of the EuroHESC programme, through formal and informal networks and collaboration, and moreover in a reflexive spirit, given that researchers of higher education are implicated in the changing landscape they are studying. The Review Panel suggests that the Project Leaders undertake a self-evaluation in two years’ time and share their self-assessments with each other and with the Review Panel.

Collaborative ventures in general face great challenges and very few succeed in achieving all of their goals. Challenges faced by leaders of international research programmes relate to the social dynamics of (international research) teams, different disciplinary, epistemological, cultural, generational and organisational traditions, as well as personal preferences and relationships. A particular challenge for interdisciplinary projects is to achieve consensus on standards of knowledge production and validity. As a rule, reflexion on the modes and dynamics of collaboration should be integrated into collaborative research programmes, particularly (but not only) those in the social sciences and humanities which deal with social transformations and change. Practically, research leaders and funders of international projects should be aware of the need for resources for networking and travel (and to finance the employment of doctoral students for the full duration of the project rather than the current standard of three years in many countries). In overarching thematic research programmes such as EUROCORES, the importance of steering and coordination by the Scientific Committee should not be underestimated.

If such a scheme as EUROCORES were to be reinvented, it would be vitally important to deal with the administrative and organisational difficulties caused by the inadequate integration or coordination of the peer review process and funding mechanisms that result in overly long selection processes, the loss of project partners, uneven starting dates and inappropriate formal lifespans. An extended period of funding of e.g. five years, could transform the ‘learning-by-doing’ project-groups into more professional and routinised international teams. In thematic programmes comprising multiple projects, it might also allow more time for earlier integration of theoretical frameworks and approaches and ultimately a more integrated programme and results.

Finishing on a positive note, a sometimes overlooked but highly appreciated aspect of the EUROCORES programme was the possibility for the Review Panel to maintain involvement in the programme after the initial selection of projects had been made. It was a welcome change and a rewarding opportunity to see the process of peer review through from beginning to end. This experience also promoted reflexivity among the Review Panel members regarding the operation and importance of academic peer review and the critical role it plays in research and science.