



Understanding and Misunderstanding: Cognition, Communication and Culture (EuroUnderstanding)

Review Panel Final Evaluation

Progress towards CRP goals

The progress made by the Collaborative Research Projects towards their goals over the three years of the EuroUnderstanding programme has been very good. Importantly, the CRPs and Individual Projects have managed to sharpen the descriptions of their goals after having been through the extremely important and fruitful process of implementing them in viable research questions, theoretically, experimentally and methodically. An admirable amount of effort, willingness to collaborate and ingenuity has been put into exploiting the expertise of the vastly different disciplines (psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, philosophy, computer science and various forms of modeling, etc.), producing innovative designs and approaches to research questions.

Integration and collaboration within the CRPs seems to have been at the appropriate level and very beneficial for all partners; the number of publications with authors from different Individual Projects is rather low, but more will emerge after the formal end of the programme, as these will be publications with a longer gestation period. There are significant differences between CRPs in the number of publications that seem to acknowledge support from the EUROCORES programme – authors should be careful in future to acknowledge the programme. Overall, the yield of scientific contributions has been excellent.

Integration across the programme

The contribution of the CRPs to the programme was very satisfactory. The three CRPs were integrated well in terms of the overarching scientific goals, while contributing to a range of different and more specific research themes. Bearing in mind that these CRPs were not selected with any view to how they related to each other, and that some of them are internally quite heterogeneous, the programme as a whole nevertheless exhibits a great deal of synergy and fits to the goals of the programme.

The joint meetings and activities of the CRPs provided ample opportunities for exchanging knowledge and experience across the CRPs. It seems that the CRPs and IPs followed the recommendations from the mid-term evaluation to collaborate and integrate research between different and (apparently) closely related areas of research to good effect.

There is no doubt that the added value of the programme for the CRPs has been important. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that the kinds of research and methodologies so well suited to explore the issues formulated in the strategic goals would have been possible for any of the Individual Projects without having been part of this programme.

That being said, the level of collaboration and, consequently, the integration of the various contributions of the CRPs, appears not to have fully realised its potential. Integration at the programme level was less than in previous comparable programmes. There have been several joint, programme-level scientific events, and a summer school. But there is only one publication with authors from different CRPs, which could be taken as an indication that the main focus of the CRPs has been more inwards, aiming at cooperation within a CRP, rather than outwards, focusing on crossing CRP-boundaries.

This is, at least in part, explained by the broad range of issues that the programme was concerned with, as well as the spread in disciplinary and methodological approaches involved. Perhaps more collaboration could have been and still could be achieved by focusing more on thematic issues which cut across different CRPs.

A benefit that appears to have occurred is that collaborative links have been forged – not only within but also across CRPs – which seem likely to endure beyond the EuroUnderstanding funding period.

Networking, training and dissemination

Activities that aimed at dissemination of the research results within the various scientific communities were plentiful and adequately focused on the appropriate audiences. The researchers involved in all three CRPs have been very active, not only presenting at conferences and workshops but also organising many events, being involved in editorial activities, and so on.

Training activities concerned exchanges and short-term visits of junior researchers, in addition to the organisation of the 2013 summer school on concepts, normativity and cognition. Apart from the latter initiative, which was successful and important for the training of a new generation of researchers, training activities seem to have been somewhat “accidental”. A programme level plan for training activities would have strengthened the overall impact. Networking should lead to career building, and young researchers, including from outside the programme, could have been involved more.

As for dissemination activities aimed at public outreach, there were some in NormCon, and quite a number in DRUST, but virtually none in CCCOM. This may be partly explained by the nature of the phenomena that formed the domain of the various CRPs, where some of which lend themselves more for presentation to a general audience than others. But, again, the lack of plan for these activities at the level of the programme is visible here and in future for such programmes, this should be considered more carefully at an early stage.

The number of published and/or submitted articles/book chapters varies across CRPs and IPs, but is satisfying, keeping in mind that much of this appeared in distinguished international journals with high impact.

As far as the dissemination of the results on the web is concerned, the situation has not changed considerably from the mid-term evaluation: generally, the visibility of individual CRPs on the web is low, with the exception of some individual projects and researchers.

General comments and other feedback

In view of the broad range and complex nature of the phenomena which the programme has dealt with, the time available and the diversity of methodologies and approaches that were represented, the programme, despite not having realised all of the set goals, can be considered successful. In terms of programme-level integration and “cross-over” it may not have realised its full potential, but a lot of excellent research has been done, and in individual CRPs, and between two of the CRPs, a lot of collaborative research has been done. The quite concrete follow-up activities and plans that are mentioned for each of the three CRPs testify to the fruitfulness of the programme.

In particular the programme has developed some very innovative research designs which will foster new collaborative research among the participants – some are already planned – and be an inspiration and a platform for future research within the research topics dealt with in the programme. It is indicative that some CRPs/IPs have links to several relevant national and international funding agencies external to the programme, making it possible to continue their research.

Improvements could be made to exploit the potential of research collaboration even more:

- Focus on common and complementary themes among individual researchers, and the establishment and funding of thematic research groups (cross-CRP);

- Dissemination of research in open access and to a wider public by making better use of Internet facilities (websites, social media...)
- The possibility of forming subsidiary expert/consultant teams at the start of the programme or after the first year of such a programme.
- One should not only pursue peaceful collaborations, but should also seek to skilfully utilise – and even provoke – debate and controversy. It is by way of well-managed controversy that ideas and arguments can often be elaborated effectively.

The Review Panel noted that some of the PIs involved in the CRPs seem to have been involved in several projects at the same time – this may be a signal to funding organisations and institutions that researchers are under pressure to take on more than is really advisable. For future similar programmes one might consider asking PIs for a statement concerning their current involvement in research projects, along with a specification of the time allocated for each project.

The concept of “Associated Partners” in the EUROCORES scheme is a problematic one: as Associated Partners are not funded, there is no incentive, apart from shared research interest, for them to participate actively. In some cases this nevertheless works out well; in other cases it is hard to say that substantial contributions are made, and in still others, there is a danger that their contribution is not adequately recognised by the funding organisations.

The primary dimensions that are interrogated in the EUROCORES final reporting process are organisational and generally pragmatic (promotion of collaboration, networking, interdisciplinary interaction, novelty), rather than epistemic (improvement of our knowledge about the world). The reports of the CRPs should try to describe in more detail what epistemic progress has been made. The ESF should also try to collect information on publications from the programme that will emerge in the coming years.

To the ESF and national funding organisations, the Panel would like to stress that with the demise of the EUROCORES scheme, the national funding organisations have a responsibility for organising a funding opportunity of a similar nature, i.e. for bottom-up, interdisciplinary, medium-sized research programmes, particularly for the humanities and social sciences, on complex topics with a broad scope but with light-weight administration.

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