

European research area: activities within the scope of the EC framework programme 2002-2006

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This Annual Report on research and technological development activities covers developments and activities during the period from January 2003 to March 2004.

The Commission states that a major step towards the creation of a European Research Area was taken in 2003 with the first full year of the 6th Framework Programme. The Programme is one of the largest international R&D programmes in the world, with a budget of EUR 17.5 billion for the period 2002-06 (increased to 19.2 billion euro with the enlargement of the Union).

The 6th Framework Programme has attracted a very high level of response. During 2003 over 16000 proposals were submitted involving nearly 160000 participants from more than 50 countries. Some 2600 of these proposals were retained for funding (involving over 27000 participants).

Under the heading of Focusing and Integrating Community Research, more than 10000 proposals were submitted of which over 1,600 were selected for funding involving some 24000 participations. The majority of these were in the seven thematic priorities identified in the 6th Framework Programme, and a significant number in the horizontal activities involving SMEs and the specific measures in support of international cooperation. In addition, the new activities introduced in the 6th Framework Programme on Scientific Support to Policy and NEST (New and Emerging Science and Technology) witnessed a considerable success with 128 proposals selected to be funded.

Calls for proposals in the Structuring the European Research Area heading led to nearly 6000 proposals being received in 2003, the vast majority under the human resources and mobility actions. Some 880 of these proposals were selected for funding. Furthermore, a Researcher's Mobility Portal was launched providing information on job and funding opportunities and the practicalities of a European research career.

Under the Strengthening the Foundations of the European Research Area heading, a new activity was introduced in the 6th Framework Programme, the ERANet initiative – to network and open up national and regional research programmes. The initiative has a successful start in 2003 with 74 proposals received in the first call of which over 30 were selected for funding.

Regarding the dissemination of results, the Research and Innovation actions in the 6th Framework Programme, including the network of Innovation Relay Centres, supported the use of research results for the purpose of innovation while the horizontal research activities involving SMEs allowed smaller companies to access research which meets their needs.

Implementation and budgetary execution of the Programme remained on track, a major achievement given the level of response. By the end of 2003, a total of 489 contracts were signed with a financial commitment of 1.64 billion euro. The rest of the budget for 2003 was committed globally, and then committed to individual contracts during 2004.

The report lists other actions toward the creation of a European Research Area and moves on to describe developments on Member States and the application of the open method of coordination. 2003 was an important year in this regard, through the application of the Open Method of Coordination to the objective of raising research investments towards 3% of GDP in the EU. Groups of experts from Member States were established in six areas under the Scientific and Technical Research Committee (CREST) as a first cycle in the application of the Open Method of Coordination for the 3% objective.

In line with the 3% objective, nearly all Member States have set national targets for increasing R&D investment. Latest data suggests that a majority of Member States have increased their level of public funding of R&D since 2002, although substantial further progress is needed to reach the 1% of GDP. Trends in private sector investments in research are less clear, and the situation varies considerable across Member States.

The implementation of the Sixth Framework programme is well on track. The continued high level of response from the research community shows its important role in the promotion of the European research efforts. At the same time the Commission is making improvements to the implementation of the Programme in order to address concerns of the research community and the recommendations of monitoring and evaluation exercises, including the report of the high level panel on the effectiveness of the Instruments of the 6th Framework Programme. The Commission has set out these measures in its response to the panel's recommendations and has established an action plan to rationalise and accelerate procedures.