



Brussels, 16 December 2020

NOTE TO
GIANFRANCO SELVAGIO, PRESIDENT, R&D ISPRA
ROBERT KENNY, POLITICAL SECRETARY, R&D ISPRA

Subject: Promoting JRC Scientific Excellence - some case studies

Dear colleagues,

Thank you for your letter of 23 November and your positive view on the way we are handling the ongoing coronavirus crisis. We are indeed committed to do the very best to address the challenges of the pandemic and to ensure the best possible conditions for our colleagues during this difficult period.

Thank you also for sharing your thoughts about scientific excellence in the JRC. Scientific excellence is without doubt the cornerstone of our work and a key enabler for our role within the Commission as provider of evidence-based support to policy. Therefore, I could not agree more that we need to ensure and promote it across our organisation. Because of its importance, however, we need to address related issues **in a strategic way**, paying also due respect to our **specific position as a Commission service**. Let me go through the specific cases mentioned in your letter one by one.

1. First, you referred to the **JRC Editorial Review Board (JERB)**. In my letter of 19 August (*Ares(2020)4321734*), I repeated the reason for adopting an Editorial Review Policy and setting up the Editorial Review Board. The JRC needed an authorisation process with which it can take full responsibility for the science and knowledge that it produces. I am pleased to see the Board in operation since 1 November.

Most, if not all, of the issues you address in your excerpt have been covered in discussions on the dedicated Editorial Review Board web pages on Connected. The Board also ran a very well attended communication campaign on the editorial review process in September. The echoes of this campaign have been very positive.

I am very pleased that many JRC scientists have signed up as reviewers. As an inclusive JRC-wide process, the internal editorial review improves internal communication, spreads knowledge and makes us more aware of one of our strengths: the multidisciplinary nature of our work.

Having said that, let me add that I share your view that in the future we may need to look at upstream aspects of our publications to ensure quality. This may well come up when we receive the first evaluation results on the functioning of the Editorial Review Board.

2. You also raise the issue of **JRC's participation in Horizon Europe**. You may recall that in 2018, as Horizon Europe was being born, the JRC agreed to play an active role in the implementation of Horizon Europe (co-creation of the strategic plan, missions, work programmes), together with other interested Commission services. As a result, we should refrain from participating in competitive bidding, since doing both would breach our obligation to guard against conflict of interest. This new approach also addresses a number of concerns that have been raised in the past, like the ones you mention – distortion of the research market, impinging on EU funds for the research community, equal treatment.

With this new approach, **our involvement in Horizon Europe will be more strategic**. We also have an entry point for JRC in the calls for proposals that is congruent with the principles that we must uphold and that allows us to work with consortia:

- To ensure equal treatment of all consortia applying for funding under a particular call, the JRC's contribution to the project will be pre-defined and published in the call so that all consortia that apply can make recourse to the JRC on an equal basis.
- To ensure that we do not impinge on the budget for the research community, the JRC has decided to work with consortia using its own budget.

Practically, our colleagues will be able to work with consortia in a number of different ways, tailored to the specific work:

- A first option would be that JRC is an unfunded beneficiary in the Grant Agreement. This option has the advantage that the collaboration is anchored from the start in the consortium's contractual arrangement. Note however that at this stage, the Commission has not yet decided if unfunded beneficiaries in the Grant Agreement will exist under Horizon Europe.
- A second option would be to sign a Collaboration Agreement with the consortium in which JRC's work with the consortium is defined.
- A third option would be to sign 'lighter' Agreements such as a Letter of Intent (e.g. for taking part in the governance of a project) or an IP Agreement (e.g. for data sharing).

Directorate A is available to give guidance to our scientists on what instrument is most suited for their collaboration.

Directorate A will also soon launch the new **Holistic Agreements Registry & Monitoring Application (HARMONIA)**, a repository and monitoring tool for the non-monetary agreements of the JRC with external partners, from their preparation to their implementation. It will allow everyone in the JRC to get a better overview of existing and new agreements planned, for example per directorate, topic and country, and to follow their implementation.

Over the years, the JRC has been formally and informally collaborating with a high number of renowned partners all over the world. Formal agreements have been signed with a wide range of types of partners, from international organisations, academia inside and outside the EU, governments and public authorities, industry, to associations and networks of research organisations and others. Currently, we count alone around 100 Memoranda of Understandings and around 100 (non-monetary) Collaboration Agreements with partners inside and outside the EU. These collaborations have been fostering JRC's scientific

excellence, reinforcing support to EU policy and political priorities, broadening JRC's competences in priority nexus and strategic areas and contributing to the implementation of JRC's Education and Training Strategy.

Finally, I want to stress that I fully support collaborations with renowned international research teams as vehicles to build up scientific excellence. The JRC has in place a number of initiatives and programmes to enable scientific teams to benefit from enriching academic and research organisation collaborations: Collaboration Agreements (mentioned above), the Centres for Advanced Studies, opening our research infrastructures, exchange programmes. Our scientists are strongly encouraged to make the most of these opportunities, specifically:

- By connecting to the **Centre for Advanced Studies (CAS)**, and to benefit from the strategic networks that the lead scientists bring to the CAS projects in thematic fields that are mostly novel for the JRC. Substantial funding is provided under CAS for networking including participation to workshops and conferences, organisation of workshops, summer schools and expert meetings.
 - By making use of the **Visiting Researchers Programme (VRP)**, the JRC's "sabbatical" scheme, allowing JRC scientists to spend up to 3 months in an academic or research organisation. The VRP is managed under the Exploratory Research Programme, which in itself is not working in isolation and in addition to reaching out to external networks, specifically fosters the development of a cross-unit community on exploratory research. Apart from the personal gain of VRP for the participating scientists of the JRC, the programme puts emphasis on sharing the knowledge with the JRC as a whole through seminars and publications.
 - By providing **access to the JRC's Research Infrastructure** (Open Access RI), following open calls for interest, allowing the JRC scientists to benefit from the experiments, data and knowledge created through the programme, e.g. through co-authoring publications, working with the generated data, and future collaborations.
 - By creating a unique network of academic institutions with the JRC on doctoral research, the **Collaborative Doctoral Partnership Programme** multiplies the benefits of the individual collaboration agreements with the academic institutions. Through meetings and workshops with supervisors as well as students from the different organisations, the JRC can play a pivotal role in engaging in novel research in the selected thematic fields and facilitate exchange also between the partners, thus bringing research in the field forward as a whole.
3. Finally yet importantly, you mention the **Knowledge Management** layer of our organisation. I have already had the opportunity to express how important this is for our work and the support we give to policy. Of course, there is still space for improvement here, and this may well be one of the areas that will be discussed as part of the follow up to **our Strategy and Culture Summit** (see my related blog on Connected, and my report to the recent COCORE meeting).

As you referred especially to the **Exploratory Research programme**, I include in the Annex some further details, facts and figures on the functioning of the programme and its links to other scientific development schemes.

Best regards,

(e-signed)
Stephen QUEST

Cc: B. Magenham, D. Al Khudhairy, J. Gysemans

ANNEX: EXPLORATORY RESEARCH IN THE JRC

Since the reorganisation of JRC in 2016, **Exploratory Research in the JRC** is addressed strategically with three different programmes that target scientists at expert, postdoc and PhD level: the **Centre for Advanced Studies**, the **Exploratory Research programme** and the **Collaborative Doctoral Partnership programme**.

With projects in the **Centre for Advanced Studies (CAS)**, the JRC specifically addresses topics that are emerging at the science-policy horizon or are novel to the JRC. By recruiting lead scientists from outside the organisation who bring with them already established networks in the field, the CAS ensures that the research at JRC does not start from scratch and is connected from the beginning with strategic networks. Substantial funding is provided under CAS for networking such as participation to workshops and conferences, organisation of workshops, summer schools and expert meetings¹.

In contrast to the topics chosen for the CAS, for the projects under **Exploratory Research** sufficient in-house expertise exists to the lead and guide of the projects by JRC scientists. While it is expected that the lead units leverage on their existing networks for the ER projects, the programme specifically encourages the recruited staff to participate to workshops and conferences. The programme foresees funding for one mission per year to attend a workshop or conference and one mission to gather the community during the annual Exploratory Workshop, allowing colleagues to connect internally to their peers. Furthermore, with a dedicated ER seminar series and organisation of social events the risk for working in silos is actively counter-acted.

Finally, with the **Collaborative Doctoral Programme**, the JRC is strategically engaging with Higher Education Institutions to co-supervise PhD students. The academic institutions are being selected following a transparent call for expression of interest for their research reputation, their complementary research to JRC and their PhD programmes. In addition to the bilateral connections between the hosting units and the universities, the CDP programme is also building a community of students and supervisors across the different thematic areas. For example, a first workshop for all mentors and supervisors from both JRC and academia is scheduled for 10 December.

While each of these programmes thrive on their specific networks within their thematic areas, a particular effort is made in creating an active cross-cutting exploratory research community allowing scientists and students to connect and to reach out to internal and external networks. This effort becomes visible also in the number of co-authored publications with scientists of other units and outside organisations.

¹ The number of visitors to CAS jumped from just 2 in 2016 to 111 in 2019, comprising 93 visitors and 18 experts. Also increasing is the number of policy events, lectures, workshops and seminars, which rose from 1 in 2016 to 24 in 2019