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Good news on the Horizon

It may be hard to sustain the €90bn Horizon 2020 budget, writes
CONOR O'CARROLL

SINCE THE European Commission announced the major European research and innovation investment plan for the period 2014 to 2020 last December there have been long and intense negotiations on its content. This will be the successor to the current Framework Seven programme that has seen more than 1,200 applicants from Ireland taking €384 million for research and development.

The new programme, Horizon 2020, has a proposed budget of €90bn. The programme will support research towards excellent science, competitive industries and better society. It will build on the current Framework Seven programme with outstanding schemes such as the Marie Curie Actions and European Research Council. The good news is that Europe's ministers for science have approved the general structure of the programme. However, there is still a long way to go before final approval by member states and the European Parliament by the end of 2013.

While the science ministers have approved the budget, it will be those with the finance portfolio who make the final decision. Although research and innovation are central to economic growth, in the current context, it may be hard to sustain the €90bn budget, and there are fears that it may drop as low as €60bn.

The Advisory Council on Science Technology and Innovation (ACSTI) has led the national debate on Horizon 2020. The ACSTI task force chaired by Prof Anita Maguire of UCC developed a clear national position in response to the Commission's original "green paper" on plans for the successor to Framework Seven. The detailed submission from Ireland certainly influenced the final Horizon 2020 proposal from the Commission. "Horizon 2020 mirrors many of our national priorities," said Maguire. "Where national priorities and European priorities match we will find the areas of greatest opportunity. We need, however, to be mindful to ensure that we put in place the supports to enable Irish researchers to fully participate in European research, to secure the best collaborations and maximise funding through Horizon 2020."

The council recently made a number of recommendations on how to maximise Irish participation in Horizon 2020, and it made the point that the right national support structure for Horizon 2020 should be developed, based on the current support structure that has boosted participation in Framework Seven.

Indeed, Irish success was celebrated earlier this month when President Michael D Higgins presented outstanding achievement awards to companies and academic researchers who have reached the pinnacle of European research at Ireland's Champions of EU Research.

ACSTI believes that there should be a substantial strengthening of support for participation by industry and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). This should build on the already successful national support for Research for the Benefit of SMEs that has led to the highest degree of SMEs' participation of the 27 EU member states.

Measures in Ireland should complement those at European levels in ensuring optimal mobility for researchers in Ireland, both from academia and industry. In a pilot scheme under Framework Seven, Ireland has secured three

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Marie Curie European Industrial Doctorate programmes. This is an excellent result given that only 21 were funded in total across 35 countries. They include collaboration between Intel Labs, NUI Maynooth and Cern, the world's leading particle physics research centre. The newly established Irish Research Council will soon launch a funding scheme that will see doctoral candidates employed in companies as part of their PhD programme.

The Euroscience Open Forum 2012 (ESOF 2012) also takes place on July 11th to 15th in Dublin. Over the five days there will be a wide range of sessions focusing on EU research policy and funding. The European Commission will also host a conference for Marie Curie funded researchers on July 10th and 11th. The European Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science Máire Geoghegan-Quinn will launch the final call for applications in Framework Seven on July 11th in Dublin. It will have the largest budget to date at an estimated €9 billion; this is an opportunity not to be missed by researchers in Ireland.

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