Evaluation of the ESF Instruments: Exploratory Workshops, Networks and à la carte Programmes

Technopolis

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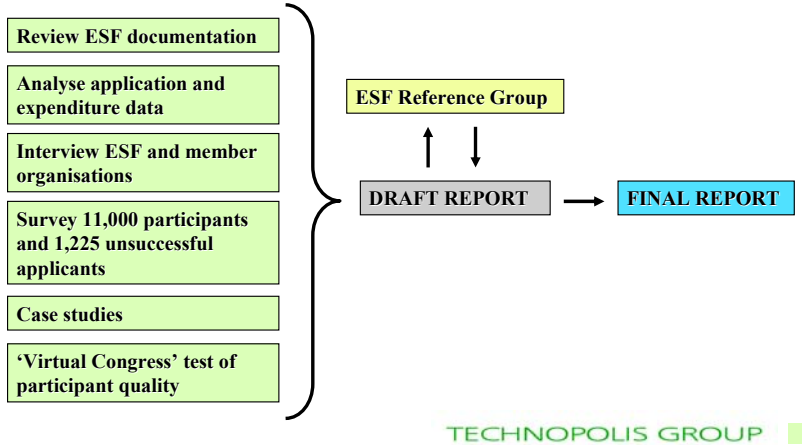
The evaluation considered ESF's traditional instruments

- The Exploratory Workshops aim to explore an emerging and/or innovative field of research or research infrastructure at a European level and should demonstrate the potential to open up new directions in research or new domains. They should also show potential for initiating follow-up research activities and/or developing future collaborative actions. Cross-disciplinary topics are encouraged
- The Networks discuss, plan, innovate, analyse or co-ordinate research. They bring together scientists to explore the potential of developing and carrying out research at a European level. Very often, they give rise to other ESF activities such as scientific Programmes or European Research Conferences
- The Programmes are medium- to long-term activities focused on specific themes. They bring together substantive research projects carried out by multinational teams of researchers, and may include limited fellowship schemes. They concentrate on how expertise can be co-ordinated and developed effectively at a European level

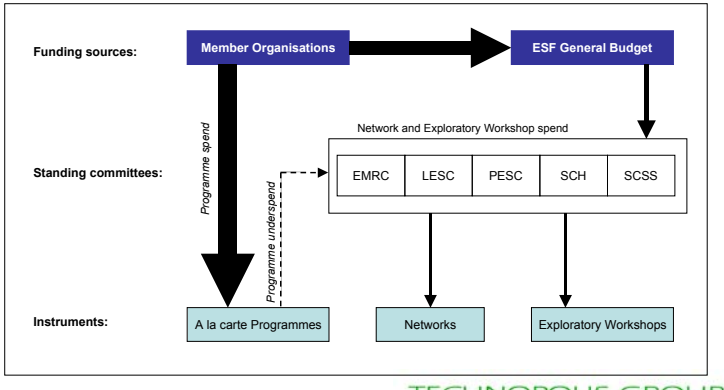
The Evaluation Questions

1. Assess the effectiveness of each of the networking instruments against ESF's own goals as formulated in the ESF Statute, its current Plan, and in the Calls for Proposals
2. Assess the impact of each of the instruments on the European research community and its added value: how do the instruments respond to the needs and aspirations of this community
3. Assess if and how the instruments influence science policy in Europe
4. Assess the impact of the instruments on the progress of science: scientific innovation or opening up new areas of science, creation of new research programmes, scientific publications, etc.

We used multiple methods to generate robust results



Programmes are funded à la carte by the member organisation. The smaller instruments are funded by ESF's general budget



The member organisations largely supported the status quo, but said ESF's instruments were too little known

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	No opinion	Agree	Strongly agree	% Agree - Disagree
The instrument is not known to some important sections of the research community in your country	2%	19%	8%	61%	10%	50%
The instrument is an important part of ESF's portfolio	2%	6%	14%	64%	15%	71%
The instrument should be continued in its current form	3%	14%	18%	55%	11%	49%
The instruments do not involve the leading researchers in their field	3%	29%	41%	27%	0%	-5%
The instruments should be more open to non-Europeans (e.g. China, Japan, USA)	5%	26%	15%	48%	7%	24%
The instruments are very open to the European academic research community	2%	15%	17%	65%	2%	50%
The instruments are very open to industrial participation	12%	33%	53%	2%	0%	-43%
The instruments add value to nationally funded research	6%	3%	14%	71%	6%	68%
The instruments effectively brings together national research programmes*	6%	18%	27%	45%	4%	25%
We often make additional national research funding available to researchers as a result of an ESF Exploratory Workshop**	13%	33%	47%	7%	0%	-39%
The instruments often lead to further collaborative research activity***	3%	12%	24%	47%	15%	47%
The a la carte funding principle of ESF Programmes is inefficient****	9%	31%	38%	19%	3%	-18%

Participants saw the projects as interdisciplinary, high-quality within Europe, adequately funded and additional

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	No opinion	Agree	Strongly agree	n	% Agree - Disagree
The Project was within a single research discipline	15%	36%	5%	32%	11%	3656	-8%
The Project was well known to the academic research community and was open to all interested academic parties **	2%	15%	18%	45%	19%	3658	47%
The Project was well known to the industrial research community and was open to all interested industrial parties**	13%	24%	51%	10%	2%	3656	-25%
The Project involved the key European researchers in the field**	0%	3%	6%	44%	46%	3657	87%
The Project involved the key non-European researchers in the field	9%	33%	18%	29%	12%	3656	-1%
The Project received insufficient funding **	5%	29%	46%	15%	5%	3655	-14%
The Project represents good value for money*	1%	3%	21%	42%	34%	3655	72%
The Project was weakly connected to research activities funded by national funding agencies**	9%	32%	35%	21%	3%	3653	-17%
The Project was strongly connected to research activities funded by EU funding agencies**	3%	15%	43%	32%	8%	3654	22%
The Project would have been undertaken without ESF support	25%	41%	25%	6%	3%	3654	-57%

The main impact were network-related, building and reinforcing 'knowledge communities' in Europe

	Achieved	Expect to achieve	Do not expect to achieve	n
You have met and exchanged ideas with colleagues	96%	3%	0%	3511
You have shared or gained access to knowledge and expertise *	89%	8%	3%	1651
You have shared or gained access to research results, facilities or samples	79%	14%	8%	3314
You have raised the profile of your research in this area	61%	30%	9%	3202
You have increased your travel funds*	51%	10%	39%	1228
You have provided research opportunities for young researchers	47%	30%	23%	2719
Your have improved your career development or mobility opportunities*	46%	22%	31%	1296
You have developed collaborative research opportunities in fields that are new to you	38%	38%	23%	2989
You have published joint research papers	37%	32%	30%	3055
You have submitted applications for further collaborative research funding (e.g. ESF, COST, Framework Programme)	31%	30%	39%	2550
You have made progress on research infrastructure or access to research facilities issues	29%	32%	39%	2391
Improved access to other funding sources**	23%	30%	47%	684
You have secured funding for further collaborative research (e.g. ESF, COST, Framework Programme)	15%	34%	51%	2272

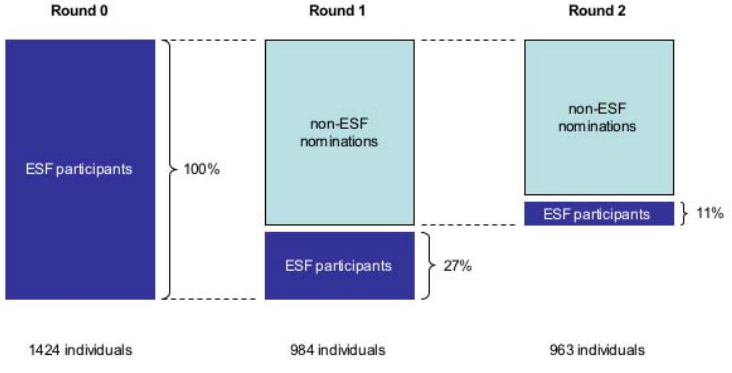
We used a modified version of COSEPUP's 'virtual congress' approach to test whether ESF networks involve leading researchers

- **The US Academies' Committee on Science, Engineering and Public Policy recently experimented with this as a way to assess the strength of US science in 3 fields**
- **It uses a nomination approach: *"If you could invite the 10 most interesting researchers in your field to a seminar, who would you invite?"***
- **These nominated are then asked the same question, so the process converges on identifying those recognised by their peers as leaders**

We sampled projects for the 'virtual congress' exercise across Standing Committees and instruments

Standing Committee	Exploratory Workshop	Network	Programme
EMRC LESC	1	1	1
LESC		1	1
LESC PESC	1		
LESC SCSS	1		
PESC		2	1
SCH	1	1	1
SCSS	1		1
Total	5	5	5

We asked project participants to nominate - then asked the nominated non-participants to nominate



11% of second-round nominees were participants, indicating that the instruments did capture leading researchers

	Exploratory Workshops	Networks	Programmes	Total
Round 0 (Participants)	100%	100%	100%	100%
Round 1 (Nominees)	38%	31%	22%	27%
Round 2 (Nominees)	15%	13%	9%	11%

The case studies reinforced the evidence from other evaluation tools that the 3 instruments have rather distinct roles

- Exploratory workshops complete and reinforce nascent workshops, equipping them to identify needs for new research, instrumentalities and infrastructures, and to pursue funding. They are larger-scale than alternative mechanisms and focus European efforts
- Networks provide a medium-scale way to reinforce research communities and leverage existing work to strengthen European research. They have few alternatives and are especially useful in social sciences and humanities, where international networks are not so large as in the 'hard' sciences
- À la carte programmes are oriented to capacity building and training as well as research
- All provide significant European Added Value, not least providing 'bottom-up' ways to focus on issues that may be unfashionable at national and EU levels

We found that the instruments were valuable and effective means to strengthen European research

- Effectiveness: all 3 instruments effectively help achieve the ESF mission of developing and unifying European science, reinforcing European research communities
- Impact: all 3 instruments provide personal development, better networks, multidisciplinarity and (in the case of Programmes) training
- Science Policy: Effects are largely indirect, by providing a bottom-up mechanism for identifying and prioritising issues that may not achieve priority in national and EU levels
- Science: they foster research and make it more productive, offering high 'leverage' by networking research funded by others

The ESF instruments are strong bases for a more integrated set of actions to support European research networking

- Exploratory Workshops should be continued
- Networks and Programmes should be merged into a broad networking instrument, operable at a range of scales
- It is not clear that the à la carte funding mechanism for Programmes adds value. Rather, funding for them should be transferred into the ESF general budget, increasing their effects on cohesion in the European research community
- The value of operating COST Actions separately from the ESF networking instruments is also not clear. Despite the considerable institutional complexity involved, ESF should look to integrate ESF networks and COST Actions