

Public-public partnerships in research

The joint programming process

SUMMARY

The objective of coordinating national research policies to create a pan-European research system has been at the heart of European research policy since 1974. In 2000, the launch of the European Research Area (ERA) concept aimed to address fragmentation at research programming level. The ERANET scheme and Article 185 initiatives were developed to promote coordination between the national research funding organisations. This resulted in networking activities and the launch of transnational joint calls for research projects. However, these instruments faced difficulties in coordinating transnational research activities resulting from legal, financial and administrative barriers at the national level.

To push the coordination process further, the Commission proposed the concept of joint programming in 2008. This was to be a high-level strategic process led by the Member States and designed to better coordinate national research activities at the EU level. Joint programming also aimed to pool national resources to address European or global challenges such as climate change. Ten Joint Programming Initiatives (JPIs) were set up between 2009 and 2011 to implement this concept.

The JPIs developed joint strategic research agendas (SRA) in their respective areas and started to issue joint calls. However, evaluation of this initiative revealed a lack of political and financial commitment from the Member States and the persistence of administrative and legal barriers. In order to fully implement joint programming, Member States are expected to modify their research systems to align their national programmes, priorities or activities with the adopted SRAs.



In this briefing:

- Creating a European research system
- Implementing the coordination of national research systems
- First public-public partnerships
- A new approach: joint programming
- Evolution of the P2Ps
- Key challenges of joint programming
- Outlook
- Main references

Creating a European research system

National research systems are organised around three key [functions](#):

- **Orientation:** definition of the objectives to be reached by the research system (areas in which research projects should be conducted or challenges that should be addressed) and the adoption of the appropriate budgets. This function is performed at the political level by the governments and their respective ministers.
- **Programming:** translation of these high-level objectives into research programmes including the definition of scientific priorities and of the financial modalities (recurrent or competitive funding for example). This function is performed by the national ministries and the research funding organisations (research councils).
- **Execution:** conduct of the research projects by the researchers in the research performing organisations (research centres, universities, private companies).

One key objective of the establishment and implementation of an EU policy in research is to create a European system by promoting the coordination of the national activities related to each of the three key functions. Public-public partnerships (P2Ps) in research at EU level were developed to promote this coordination.

Figure 1 – Public-public partnerships in research at EU level



Source: EPRS. GPC: High Level Group for Joint Programming ('Groupe de Programmation Conjointe').

Implementing the coordination of national research systems

The initial steps

In June 1972, a [communication](#) from the European Commission set the framework for a Community policy in research and development (R&D) that included the coordination of national research policies through 'the development of concerted or jointly operated programmes'. A 1973 Commission [communication](#) stressed that this coordination aimed 'to eliminate unnecessary or unjustified duplication of work in the national programmes' and to 'gradually ... harmonise procedures for the formulation and implementation of scientific policies in the Community'. This approach was [approved](#) by the Council in January 1974. The Scientific and Technical Research Committee (CREST)¹ was created with the task of supporting this coordination. Cooperative research programmes were [established](#) by the Council in such fields as solar energy and environmental protection. By bringing together teams of researchers from different Member States to cooperate on collaborative research projects, these initiatives aimed to coordinate activities at the execution level. When [proposing](#) to establish a general framework programme for research to integrate these programmes in October 1981, the Commission again stressed the need to 'discuss national policies and bring them together' and 'decide what joint actions and initiatives should be selected'.

The title on research introduced in the Treaty of the European Economic Community by the Single European Act in 1986 affirmed, in Article 130h, that 'Member States shall, in

liaison with the Commission, coordinate among themselves the policies and programmes carried out at national level'. Article 130m² provided the legal basis for the Community to support R&D programmes undertaken by several Member States financially. This sought to encourage coordination at the higher level of programming.

In April 1994, provisions were made in the [decision](#) on the fourth framework programme for research (FP4) to promote coordination of national research programmes by using Article 130m (then renumbered 130l by the Treaty of Maastricht). In May 1994, the European Parliament called on the Commission to 'take the initiative for coordinating research policy in the Community', while in June 1994, the European Council [called](#) for the Commission 'to take any useful initiatives to promote such coordination'.

The Commission responded to these requests in October 1994, publishing a [communication](#), 'Achieving coordination through cooperation'. The Commission proposed a 'progressive approach to achieve better coordination by intensifying cooperation at the various stages of drafting and implementing research policy'. This approach was based on soft measures, including the creation of a forum for discussion for ministers and the exchange of information and data on national research programmes. However, Article 130l remained unused and no significant coordination progress was achieved at the programming and orientation levels.

The European Research Area concept

In 2000, the Commission took stock of the efforts made in the previous decades to improve coordination of research policies and to create a more coherent European research system. It [concluded](#) that 'the principal reference framework for research activities in Europe is national' – with more than 83 % of the budget on research spent at the national level – and that 'it cannot be said that there is today a European policy on research'. To address this situation, the Commission introduced the concept of the [European Research Area](#) (ERA), in which national research systems would become interoperable and integrated, allowing for better flow of knowledge, technology and people between them. Achieving a more coordinated implementation of national and European research programmes became a key priority in creating the ERA.

First public-public partnerships

New instruments were developed in the sixth framework programme for research (FP6, 2002-2006) with the objective of better structuring the ERA and starting to address transnational coordination in research at the programming level. These instruments promoted partnerships between publicly funded institutions at the national level, creating the first public-public partnerships (P2Ps) in research at EU level.

The ERANET scheme

ERA networks (ERANETs) were introduced in 2002 in FP6 as a scheme to step up coordination through the networking of national or regional research activities. Under this scheme, national and regional research funding organisations receive EU financial support to exchange information and good practices. They could develop strategic activities, including complementarities between national programmes or the identification of administrative and legal barriers that hinder transnational cooperation. Following these initial steps, stronger integration of national research programmes through the implementation of transnational research activities, based on a common strategy and a joint work programme, became the objective.

Article 185 initiatives

FP6 also included provisions to establish Member State partnerships, as defined under Article 169 of the Treaty establishing the European Community (previously Article 130I, currently Article 185 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union). Article 185 was used as a legal base for policy initiatives creating long term integrated partnerships between Member States participating on a voluntary basis, run by a dedicated implementation structure and financially supported by the framework programme. Whereas ERANETs were seen as networking instruments that could lead to joint implementation of national research programmes, the objective of Article 185 initiatives is to reach scientific, management and financial integration of national research programmes at the European level in a given field. The Council and European Parliament decision to set up a pilot Article 185 initiative, named 'European and Developing countries Clinical Trial Partnership' ([EDCTP](#)), was [adopted](#) in June 2003.

Limitations of existing instruments

In June 2004, the Commission [reaffirmed](#) that coordination of national research programmes was a key priority for ERA. In November 2004, it [reflected](#) on the progress achieved with the two new instruments so far. The Commission concluded that 'the demand for better coordination is far from being met'. It proposed to reinforce the existing P2Ps under the seventh framework programme (FP7, 2007-2013) and suggested that CREST should work to identify and analyse potential legal or administrative barriers hindering coordination of national programmes. In its [report](#) on the proposal for FP7, the European Parliament requested that FP7 'should support the coordination of national and regional research policies and programmes' to avoid fragmentation.

In 2007, the Commission [noted](#) that research on some key societal issues (climate change, energy security) 'can best, or even only, be addressed effectively through European and sometimes global research programmes'. To tackle these societal challenges, the Commission suggested that Member States should establish and implement joint programmes based on their existing national programmes. The expert group set up to debate the issue of coordination [concluded](#) in February 2008, that the Member States should develop a common vision with priorities for transnational research, establish common guidelines and eliminate existing barriers. The Council [asked](#) for 'a more strategic and better structured approach to the launch of new joint programmes' between Member States. This idea was [endorsed](#) by the European Council in March 2008.

The Commission [acknowledged](#) in 2008 that the two types of P2Ps developed so far were inappropriate for achieving large scale coordination of national programmes. ERANETs were a useful tool for the launch of joint calls between national funding organisations, but did not address the requirements for coordination of national programmes sufficiently. The Article 185 pilot partnership highlighted the difficulty of achieving full integration of national programmes. Moreover, Article 185 initiatives, as tools for joint implementation of the framework programme, could not be used for all topics. A central issue was the ability of the P2Ps to set up 'real common pots' of funding, i.e. Member States pooling their budgets to finance transnational projects. Despite the intention to do so, P2Ps almost all used a 'virtual common pot', with the Member States funding their national participants in the partnerships directly. Finally, the total budget mobilised by these instruments represented a small fraction of the total research budget in the EU.

A new approach: joint programming

The Joint Programming Process

In July 2008, the Commission [presented](#) joint programming as 'a voluntary process for a revitalised partnership between the Member States based on clear principles and transparent high-level governance'. This was seen as a 'unique opportunity to make a leap forward in pan-European research cooperation' by changing the structure of the European research landscape.

The Joint Programming Process (JPP) was intended to be a high-level strategic process led by the Member States to tackle coordination at the programming and orientation levels of ERA implementation, while at the same time addressing the fragmentation of EU research effort to confront Europe's major societal challenges more efficiently. The process was broader in scope than the joint implementation of research calls promoted by ERANETs and Article 185 initiatives. The Commission was to act as a facilitator in the JPP, which would not involve EU funding *a priori*. The Commission noted that JPP required that the Member States develop the definition of a number of framework conditions. To implement the JPP, the Commission proposed the creation of Joint Programming Initiatives (JPI).

The High Level Group on Joint Programming (GPC)

In December 2008, the Council [endorsed](#) the concept of joint programming as an approach 'based on the joint identification of societal challenges of common interest and a strengthened political commitment by Member States to produce common or concerted responses'. The Council set up a High Level Group for Joint Programming – known as the GPC (*Groupe de Programmation Conjointe*) – as a dedicated configuration of CREST, composed of high-level representatives of the Member States and the Commission. The GPC was given the task of identifying potential topics for JPIs, to evaluate the proposals for new initiatives and to produce guidance regarding the framework conditions for joint programming. The GPC thus became a key instrument for promoting coordination between Member States at the orientation level.

The Joint Programming Initiatives

Setting up a JPI meant that Member States needed to define a common vision for the agreed areas, translate this vision into a Strategic Research Agenda (SRA), and implement the SRA by jointly mobilising their national public research programmes and instruments. In December 2008, the Council [suggested](#) that a pilot JPI should be established on the topic of combating neurodegenerative diseases. The Commission prepared a recommendation on this proposal and the Council [launched](#) the EU Joint Programme on Neurodegenerative Diseases (JNPD) in December 2009. Three additional JPIs were adopted in May 2010 and a second wave of six JPIs was launched in autumn 2011.³

The voluntary guidelines for framework conditions on joint programming

As requested in its mandate, the GPC presented [voluntary guidelines](#) for framework conditions on joint programming in November 2010. These guidelines offer a list of tools and best practices for developing a standard model for JPI implementation. The framework conditions covered: peer review procedures for transnational joint calls; development of forward looking activities to prepare common visions and strategies; evaluation of joint programmes; a funding mechanism for cross-border research; dissemination and use of research findings; and the protection and management of intellectual property rights. The GPC also acknowledged that, beyond these common guidelines, the JPIs should be allowed some flexibility.

Development of public-public partnerships

Under FP7 and Horizon 2020

Under FP7, the ERANET scheme was retained and augmented with the ERANET Plus scheme, providing EU funds to top-up Member State funding for the joint calls. Four additional Article 185 initiatives were established.⁴ The Commission provided funding of €2 million for each JPI under FP7 through Coordination and Support Actions (CSA) to set up the governance structure of the JPIs and prepare the SRAs. Two JPIs also used the ERANET scheme as a tool to implement their joint activities.

Article 13 of the Horizon 2020 [Regulation](#), which is the current framework programme for research (2014-2020), mentions 'the need to build appropriate synergies and complementarities between national and European research and innovation programmes'. Article 26 provides the framework for the different public-public partnerships (P2Ps). The ERANET scheme evolved to become the ERANET Cofund, which focuses on providing EU funds for joint calls. Four of the Article 185 initiatives were renewed. The fifth (BONUS), will run on FP7 funding until 2017, and the proposal for a sixth (PRIMA), was [adopted](#) in October 2016. As under FP7, all JPIs benefited from a CSA under Horizon 2020 to support their management costs. Joint calls in eight of the 10 JPIs have also been supported by the ERANET Cofund instrument.

Support provided for public-public partnerships

Under FP7, the Commission established three initiatives to support the development and implementation of the P2Ps:

- the NETWATCH platform set up within the Joint Research Centre to monitor and analyse the impact of ERANETs;
- the ERA-LEARN initiative to support the implementation of the ERANETs; and
- the [JPIs To Co-Work](#) project to help the JPIs to implement the framework conditions and promote knowledge-sharing and exchange of best practices.

In 2015, these three initiatives were merged to create the [ERA LEARN 2020](#) platform financed under Horizon 2020. This platform serves as an information hub for the P2Ps, manages a database of all P2Ps, creates a toolbox to support the ongoing optimisation of P2P networks, and implements a systematic process for monitoring and impact assessment of P2Ps. The consortium managing the platform also reflects on the current challenges faced by the P2Ps.

Key challenges of joint programming

Member States political and financial commitment

This being an initiative led by the Member States, their full commitment to the joint programming process is essential, as pointed out in the biennial GPC [report](#) in 2010. In its 2012 [review](#), the expert group concluded that 'the lack of will at the level of national administrations to re-orientate strategies and research programmes' remained the main constraint for the JPP. In 2014, the GPC [renewed](#) its call for strengthened commitment to and support for JPP and the JPIs from the Member States and the Commission. In 2015, the Chairs of the 10 JPIs [called](#) for increased commitment from, and more cooperation between, the 28 Member States, as well as to promote awareness, visibility, attractiveness and legitimacy of JPIs throughout national research systems. The expert group evaluating the JPP in 2016 [noted](#) that 'the overall level of ambition to really support the JPIs is disappointing'. It also observed that only a limited number of Member States had developed inter-ministerial structures to support JPP at the national level.

When launching the JPIs in 2008, it was assumed that EU funding was not needed *a priori*. In the 2012 review, the expert group still agreed with this approach, noting that 'Member State-led means de facto Member State-funded'. However, the 2016 evaluation group noted that 'most countries are unwilling or unable to co-invest in the central executive resource' to implement the JPIs. It acknowledged that 'the financial support from the Commission (CSAs and the ERANET instrument) has clearly been vital to the initial development of the JPIs and it appears that this will continue to be the case'. The group concluded that 'there is a general feeling that the Member States-led JPP is not sustainable without a stronger role for the Commission'.

Moving beyond joint calls

In 2013, the GPC [considered](#) that the activities of the JPIs should be broader than transnational joint calls and should include common use of infrastructure, exchange of researchers, or joint forward-looking activities. The Chairs of the JPIs requested that Member States take action on research infrastructures, mobility, capacity building, and databases, to allow JPIs to go beyond transnational calls in 2015. In 2016, the expert group noted that 'JPIs should not just be engaged in joint calls for transnational research' but demonstrate leadership in overcoming the barriers to joint programming.

Financial and administrative barriers

In 2014, the GPC noted that the degree of divergence of terminology, rules and procedures should be reduced to allow a better interoperability of national research programmes. These divergences were often the reason why real common pots of funding could not be set up. The GPC working group on framework conditions [called](#) for a simplification of the rules and procedures and for common guidelines on terminology, rules and procedures for research funding. However, the GPC recognised that JPP 'requires a balance between standardised and tailored approaches'. The 2016 evaluation group noted that the variable geometry of national research systems remained an obvious barrier for implementing joint programming.

Alignment

The expert group concluded in 2012 that the most significant challenge to the Joint Programming Process (JPP) remained that of aligning national programmes. The issue of alignment was identified as a central element for the successful implementation of the JPP at the Dublin conference on Joint Programming in 2013. The conference [concluded](#) that Member States needed to fully engage in the alignment of national research programmes in order to unlock the potential of joint programming. In 2014, the GPC [defined](#) alignment as 'the strategic approach taken by Member States to modify their national programmes, priorities or activities as a consequence of the adoption of joint research priorities in the context of joint programming with a view to implementing changes to improve efficiency of investment in research at the level of Member States and ERA'. It also asked the Member States to 'adapt their national programmes, priorities or activities' in the context of joint programming. The working group on alignment under the ERA LEARN 2020 platform [adopted](#) a broad approach on alignment, encompassing all actions and instruments at any stage of the research programming cycle. However, in 2016, the expert group for evaluation of the JPP noted that 'most countries are neither adapting their national research activities towards the SRA nor the activities of the JPIs'. Both the GPC and the ERA LEARN 2020 platform focus their activities on the concept of alignment.

Outlook

The first public-public partnerships (P2Ps) were set up with the ambition of supporting coordination of national research activities at the programming level. ERANETs and Article 185 initiatives developed into practical tools to implement transnational joint calls. Joint programming was then introduced as a process to go beyond the limited aims met by the first P2Ps. However, the objective of allowing the JPIs to 'implement multi-annual joint programmes and cooperation throughout the policy cycle', as described by the expert group in 2012, has not been achieved. To do so, the Member States have to commit to a transformation of their national research systems to enable alignment of their programmes and research activities.

As acknowledged by the GPC in 2014, the JPP has been a learning process and a 'test bed' to show how far transnational collaboration in the ERA can be developed. In order to address all the challenges faced by the JPP, the GPC [mandate](#) was revised and broadened in April 2016. However, the future of the JPP and the JPIs will depend on the political will of the Member States and on the intentions of the Commission to support the process, especially financially, under the next framework programme.

Main references

[Evaluation of the Joint Programming to Address Grand Societal Challenges](#), European Commission, 2016.

[The ERANET scheme](#), V. Reillon, EPRS, European Parliament, October 2016.

[The Article 185 initiatives](#), V. Reillon, EPRS, European Parliament, October 2016.

[The Joint Programming Initiatives](#), V. Reillon, EPRS, European Parliament, October 2016.

Endnotes

¹ CREST is now known as the European Research Area Committee ([ERAC](#)).

² The content of this article was never modified. However the article was renumbered Article 130I by the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, Article 169 by the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997, and Article 185 by the Lisbon Treaty in 2007. For more information see '[Research in the European Treaties](#)', V. Reillon, EPRS, European Parliament, March 2016.

³ Three JPIs were [launched](#) in May 2010 on agriculture, food security and climate change (FACCE), cultural heritage, and healthy diet for a healthy life (HDHL). The second wave of six JPIs was approved in [September 2011](#) on the demographic challenge and [December 2011](#) on healthy and productive seas and oceans, urban challenges, sustainable water systems, climate knowledge and antimicrobial resistance.

⁴ The four additional Article 185 initiatives are '[Eurostars](#)', supporting SMEs performing research activities; the Active and Assisted Living programme ([AAL](#)) on ICT tools to support elderly people; the European Metrology Research Programme ([EMRP](#), later EMPIR); and the Joint Baltic Sea Research and Development Programme ([BONUS](#)).

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