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Social Challenges as Research Issues – from needs to research projects?

Science and social needs are in continuous interaction. Society is always looking for new ways to overcome shortages but science and other players in society like entrepreneurs find the solutions. New discoveries create new needs.

To make this interaction as efficient as possible the knowledge society needs a well-organised knowledge economy in which research does not stand apart from society or the economy but is an integral part of the knowledge economy. Research provides insights, perspectives and proposals for solutions and simultaneously addresses society's issues to help find solutions, as well as providing various options for solutions.

As regards public research at universities and non-university research institutions this interactive process depends mainly on autonomy and competition. Autonomy relates not least of all to the research programmes and the recruitment and remuneration of researchers, as well as the facilities. Competition also relates to the financial resources in particular.

To ensure intensive interaction between science and society, including the business sector, through competition for financial resources, business believes a financing model which could be implemented more effectively is essential. The core behind this is that the so-called basic financing - which the various public institutions use as they see fit - is allocated according to the success achieved in the competition for research projects in scientific self-management (German Research Foundation) or in competition for state research programme projects or for cooperation projects with business and contracts awarded by business. Linking research funding to payments of students at universities could also be integrated into this. Similar effects could be achieved to a lesser extent if research institutions were to be given complete freedom to operate on the research market regardless of the distribution key for public funding. But good governance requires comprehensive competition as a control-mechanism.

Particularly close integration of society and public research is to be expected from the French fiscal research funding model which grants a tax bonus to all private sector research, doubled for cooperation projects and contracts with public research institutions.

In such a system, research planning is conducted by the political stakeholders in research funding programmes, cooperation partners and contracting entities and - last but not least - the public research institution researchers themselves – partly with a view to attracting potential partners and contracting entities, including those of the state and the business sector.