
Ispra, 23rd November 2020

NOTE TO THE ATTENTION OF
MR S. QUEST- DIRECTOR GENERAL OF JRC

Subject: Promoting JRC Scientific Excellence – some case studies

Dear Mr Quest,

Firstly we wish to congratulate the JRC management for its overall good handling of the difficult ongoing coronavirus crisis. While urgent, we don't wish that this distracts us from other important topics of importance to the JRC.

We observe that the JRC sometimes takes impromptu decisions without sufficient consultation with the staff who find their work subsequently affected. A lack of supporting evidence leads to tensions which could have been avoided - especially unfortunate when aspects of the changes do have some merits and considering that our work at the JRC is precisely to provide evidence-based policy support.

We wish look more closely at decisions surrounding these three topics:

- JRC Editorial Review Board
- JRC's role in indirect actions under Horizon Europe Horizon
- Knowledge Management

In the case of the **JRC Editorial Review Board**, whilst we acknowledge the good faith of the Editor-in-Chief and other board members in their undertaking and appreciate the efforts they have made to keep the administrative burden as low as possible, the launch of the process could have been dealt with more satisfactorily. The fault here lies in never adequately quantifying motivating factors, in particular the specifics of apparent output of substandard quality which led to its creation. Generalisations are never a good starting point for management decisions (**see Annex for further considerations**).

Next, we highlight the central role of the scientific work underpinning the publications that will undergo review by the newly created JERB. Hence, we wish to examine the consequences of the JRC's agreement with DG RTD in 2018 that the JRC will not participate in competitive bidding for **indirect actions under Horizon Europe**. This decision was taken for the plausible reason that JRC should not be competing with other organisations for EU funds, but again it was taken without consulting the scientific staff on its consequences for the JRC's research.

We recall the following finding in the **JRC Excellence in Science for Policy Report** (15 April 2020): *A high share (80%) of JRC publications is co-authored with external researchers. International co-publications tend to attract a relatively high number of citations...* It is therefore clearly essential

that **JRC scientists continue to be able to perform scientific research in collaboration with the best international scientists**, networks, and fully participate in EU funded projects that are the flagships of European research.

A key concern is that the JRC is now eligible for participation in HE funded projects only where indicated in the call, while at the same time allowed contractual arrangements have not yet been agreed (**see Annex for more background**). Our principal request here is that **further guidance be given to Units, research groups and scientists** that goes beyond simply telling them what they cannot do, but enables them to continue to be able to work successfully with their scientific peers across Europe.

Finally, there is the ongoing saga of **Knowledge Management**, and the tension between this and knowledge production. We supported many of the aims of the 2016 reorganisation, which has had a largely positive impact on the JRC's positioning in the Commission. Nevertheless, we believe that this specific issue requires another deep look (**see Annex for background**). The **exploratory research programme** should also come under some scrutiny – JRC **exploratory research is vital**, but should not be contained only within a JRC silo -as mentioned above this work could be more productive if considered hand-in-hand with external collaborations. We would welcome a JRC-wide review of these areas in consultation with the scientific staff.

Yours Sincerely,

Gianfranco Selvagio

Robert Kenny

President, R&D Ispra

Political Secretary, R&D Ispra

Cc : B. MAGENHANN, D. AL KHUDHAIRY

Annex – further supporting information

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JRC Editorial Review Board - Considerations from R&D Ispra

Excerpt :

- We acknowledge that a JRC-wide review process (for e.g. Science for Policy and Flagship Reports) can be beneficial as it should eliminate some really poorly written ones and could promote internal cross-information and corporate sentiment.
- We are less convinced of the need to review submissions to peer-reviewed journals, although we are pleased that so far the JERB has listened to feedback and promises to make such reviews cursory.
- We are also pleased the JERB has not created a totally new system, but has decided to integrate the process into the existing Pubsy system, also making promises of fast turnarounds. Properly integrating the JERB workflow into PUBSY should follow these elements:
 - a streamlined content review (JERB)
 - a streamlined Layout-review (facilitated by corporate standards and improved templates)
 - a fast approval workflow (after the JERB process), with a maximum of 3 signatures (Applicant, HoU/delegate, Director/delegate)
- The question of political sensitivity contained in the ToR is still a concern, although we have been assured by the Editor-in-chief that political sensitivity (however defined) would only be flagged but would never be used to block or censor valid scientific conclusions. All JRC work is politically sensitive, otherwise why would we do it?
- The new Editorial Review process must be evaluated during its first year. A cost-benefit analysis should quantify the extra labour invested into the process and delays introduced set against (quantifiable) improvements seen in output quality.
- Finally, we emphasize that upstream aspects are also crucially important to ensure quality, the process has to be embedded in the creation phase of all publications from the beginning. The scientific work underpinning a publication is the most important aspect. Interventions at the final step may only be superficial.

JRC role in Horizon Europe funded indirect actions

Excerpt :

This post refers to the specific detail of the JRC's role in indirect actions under Horizon Europe, details of the JRC's Work Programme are not at issue here.

Here we wish to examine the consequences of the JRC's agreement with DG RTD in 2018 that the JRC will not participate in competitive bidding for indirect actions under Horizon Europe. This decision was taken for the plausible reason that JRC should not be competing with other organisations for EU funds, but it was taken without consulting the scientific staff and fully evaluating its consequences on the JRC's research output.

We recall the following finding in the JRC Excellence in Science for Policy Report (15 April 2020): A high share (80%) of JRC publications is co-authored with external researchers. International co-publications tend to attract a relatively high number of citations... It is therefore clearly essential that JRC scientists continue to be able to perform scientific research in collaboration with the best international scientists, networks, and to be able to fully participate in EU funded projects the flagships of European research. The high standard of output in recent years, and hence the high quality of policy support, can only be maintained by curating and deepening such collaborations.

Notwithstanding the above, regarding the JRC's role in indirect actions in Horizon Europe it appears that the JRC is eligible for participation in calls only where indicated in the published WP. Even worse, each research group will require tailored solutions for their indirect action involvement, and allowed contractual arrangements do not appear to have been agreed so far, leading to much doubt and confusion. The situation as we understand is that:

- JRC is an entity eligible for participation in calls – where indicated in the WP and JRC will no longer take part in competitive bidding.
- Different activities and roles require different approaches, there is no 'fit-for-all' mechanism.
- Bilateral discussions with RTD at level of directorates/units are ongoing to explore optimal involvement of JRC in Indirect Actions.

We are surprised to learn that evaluations regarding the impact that this policy might have on the breadth and quality of JRC scientific research over the next 7 years have not been communicated to staff.

We would expect that analyses such as these listed would have been performed in advance of such a major change:

- Number of projects in which JRC groups/units/laboratories were partners in indirect actions in recent years, especially under Horizon 2020.
- Number of different groups/units/laboratories involved, and range of scientific topics, and how these dovetail with the new clusters in Horizon Europe.
- Analysis of types of roles appropriate to the above projects, that can be implemented in the above-mentioned tailored solutions, to ensure the fullest participation of the JRC in Europe's flagship research scheme.
- Plans to communicate of these alternatives to Directorates/Units and to help them maximise their opportunities within Horizon Europe.

Our latest feedback is that there is still no clearly defined approach, but rather individual groups should define their roles directly with their peers in RTD - we are not sure how well this is functioning and there is not much time remaining.

Some examples of roles that the JRC could take have apparently been identified: act as an interface between the research activities and regulatory aspects, carry out knowledge management activities (whatever that means), or help ensure that relevant research results are used for policy making. In these roles, the JRC can carry out tasks such as: integrating research results and data in databases and maintaining these databases, validating the performance of new developments, test methods and methodologies, validating and maintaining models, contributing to standardization activities, providing advice, data analytics, etc. To our eyes, these are not roles consistent with a proper scientific function, but will appear 'bolted on' and thereby the JRC's scientists will lose out in the medium and long term.

Considering that the JRC's role must be explicitly be mentioned in each call for any involvement whatsoever to be possible, we are concerned that not every Unit and research group fully understands what steps still need to be taken. We would appreciate further guidance to Units, research groups and scientists not only about what they cannot do, but help them understand what they can do in order to continue to work on an equal footing with their scientific peers across Europe over the next 7 years.

[JRC Strategy - Knowledge Management \(KM\)](#) : Time line with our previous communications related to this topic, starting from 2016 up to July 2020.