

Recommendation to set up a mechanism to enforce Blue Sky Research

Recommendation

The Austrian Council recommends setting up a mechanism to fund Top End Blue Sky Research. As part of a strategic initiative for excellent researchers and/or research groups from all disciplines this will enable additional freedom for their research work. The Austrian Council also recommends the mechanism be elaborated under the guidance of the FWF science fund with the integration of all relevant stakeholders.

Goal

The core idea of this new mechanism is to promote strategic research initiatives of excellent Austrian players, who have the potential to take on the lead shaping role in international projects, with which radical new and innovative solutions are worked out for current social challenges and global “grand challenges”. The overriding objective here is to develop international research initiatives with an Austrian lead, in order to create strategic benefits for national researchers and/or research groups.

It is also important here that the new mechanism address the potential issues of “safe science” and also support high-risk projects more than before. The research groups will also be guaranteed the greatest possible freedom to act and flexibility here. An appropriate mechanism from the Austrian Council’s point of view could be a new column in the FWF’s portfolio of mechanisms, which would also portray an enhanced self-image within the scope of its strategic realignment.

The idea here also focuses on international benchmarks such as the National Research Programme of the Swiss National Fund (SNF)

for funding scientific research or the Metascans of Policy Horizons Canada. Both methods support science-based contributions to the solution of important present-day problems on the basis of more interdisciplinary and interdisciplinary research.

Elements Of A Conceivable Administrative Tool

Bottom-up elaboration of proposals by participating project consortia
Impact evaluation, no requirements for co-financing – purely risk capital for a highly professional consortium with a brilliant idea. A new project is financed every 3 years
No allocation of funds – only the best project is financed.

Background

The acceleration of excellent research at international level is an important issue for the Austrian Council. However, excellent international research projects require an appropriate lead time. With most strategic initiatives, Austrian players are at best co-shapers (“followers”), and rarely lead in a shaping role. Essential strategic insights are then lost and participation in follow-up activities is more difficult. Mechanisms that support these kinds of projects in their formation and guarantee the required freedom for research groups do not exist yet. The Austrian Council already published proposals in 2013 to create new freedom for research in its White Paper on controlling research, technology and innovation in Austria.¹

The funding base required for this could be provided on the basis of freed-up funds from the reform of administration structures in research funding. In its report on research funding in Austria published on 24 June 2016 the Court of Auditors also argued in the same direction: According to the Austrian Court of Auditors, research funding structures in Austria are both characterised by complex and unclear cash flows and continue to be inefficient². Appropriate structural reforms can free up funds, which can then be used directly for research.

¹ White Paper on controlling research, technology and innovation in Austria, p. 21.

² Report by the Court of Auditors: Research Funding in Austria. Vienna 2016/4, p. 127