

They have chosen ignorance — open letter



Scientists from different European countries describe in this letter that, despite marked heterogeneity in the situation of scientific research in their respective countries, there are strong similarities in the destructive policies being followed. This critical analysis, highlighted in [Nature](#) and simultaneously published in a number of newspapers across Europe, is a wake-up call to policy makers to correct their course, and to researchers and citizens to defend the essential role of science in society. The letter can be signed at openletter.euroscience.org (@EuroScientist).

The national policymakers of an increasing number of Member States, along with European leaders, have completely lost touch with the reality of research.

They have chosen to ignore the crucial contribution of a strong research sector to the economy, particularly needed in the countries more severely hit by the economic crisis. Instead, they have imposed drastic budget cuts in Research and Development (R&D) that make these countries more vulnerable in the mid- and long-term to future economic crises. This has all happened under the complacent gaze of European institutions, which worry more about Member States complying with austerity measures than about maintaining and improving national R&D infrastructures that can help these countries change their productive model to a more robust one based on knowledge-generation.

They have chosen to ignore that research does not follow political cycles; that long-term, sustainable R&D investment is critical because science is a long-distance race; that some of its fruits might be harvested now, but others may take generations to mature; that if we do not seed

today, our children will not have the tools to face the challenges of tomorrow. Instead, they have followed cyclical R&D investment policies with a single objective in mind: lowering the yearly deficit to what might be an artificial value imposed by European and financial institutions, all oblivious to the devastating effect this is having on the science and innovation potential of individual Member States and of Europe as a whole.

They have chosen to ignore that public investment in R&D is an attractor of private investment; that in an “innovation State” like the United States over half of its economic growth has come from innovation with roots in basic research funded by the federal government. Instead, they unrealistically hope that the R&D spending increases required for these countries to reach the Lisbon Strategy goal of 3% of GDP will be achieved by the private sector alone, while reducing public R&D investment. This is in sharp contrast to the drop in the number of innovation companies in some of these countries and the prevalence, among small and medium-sized enterprises, of small family businesses with no innovation capacity.

They have chosen to ignore that time and resources are required to train researchers. Instead, shielded by the European directive to decrease workforce in the public sector, they have imposed drastic hiring cuts at research institutions and universities. Together with the lack of opportunities in the private sector and the cuts in human resources programs, this is triggering a “brain drain” from the South to the North and from Europe to beyond. The result is an irrecoverable loss of investment and a worsening of the R&D gap between Member States. Discouraged by the lack of opportunities and the uncertainty inherent in the concatenation of fixed-term contracts, many scientists are considering leaving the field, with the nature of research activities making this a one-way journey. This decimates the skilled research workforce available for industry. Rather than decreasing the deficit, this exodus is contributing to the creation of a new type of deficit: a deficit in technology, innovation and discovery Europe-wide.

They have chosen to ignore that applied research is no more than the application of basic research and is not limited to research with short-term market impact, as some policy makers seem to believe. Instead, at the national and European level, there is a strong shift in focus to these marketable products when those are only the low-hanging fruit of an intricate research tree. Even though some of its seeds might germinate in new fundamental insights, by undermining basic research they are slowly killing the roots.

They have chosen to ignore how the scientific process works; that research requires experimentation and that not all experiments will be successful; that excellence is the tip of an

iceberg that floats only because of the body of work beneath. Instead, science policy at the national and European level has shifted towards the funding of a diminishing number of well-established research groups, undermining the diversified portfolio we will need to face the societal and technological challenges of tomorrow. In addition, this approach is contributing to the “brain drain”, as a small number of well-funded research institutions are systematically recruiting this selected group of grant holders.

They have chosen to ignore the critical synergy between research and education. Instead, they have severed research funding for public universities, diminishing their overall quality and threatening their role as promoters of equal opportunities.

And foremost, they have chosen to ignore that research does not only need to serve the economy but also increases knowledge and social welfare, including of those with no resources to pay the bill.

They have chosen to ignore, but we are determined to remind them because their ignorance can cost us the future. As researchers and citizens, we form an international network used to exchange information and propositions. And we are engaging in a series of initiatives at the national and European level to strongly oppose the systematic destruction of national R&D infrastructures and to contribute to the construction of a bottom-up social Europe. We call on researchers and citizens to defend this position with us. There is no alternative. We owe it to our children, and to the children of our children.

Signatories

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Disclaimer: The views expressed by the signatories are not necessarily those of their employers