

Economics + Development

Redefining excellence to overcome geopolitical imbalances in research

To realize Europe's full research potential, we must broaden research excellence to recognize and reward widening participation.

26 February 2019

Dr Angela Bellia

Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellow

National Research Council of Italy

[Biography below](#)

European research funding is unevenly distributed across the European Union, to the detriment of research and innovation which is fuelled by diverse and creative input benefitting from close societal and regional connections. A driver for this uneven distribution is the pervasive focus on "research excellence", a concept with little intrinsic meaning and instead often defined through exclusionary and competitive means.

(/). *Horizon Europe* is a planned 7-year, €100 billion EU research funding programme intended to succeed the ~~current *Horizon 2020*~~. The success of this upcoming funding programme hinges on how well it manages to overcome these inequalities. To realize Europe's full research potential, diverse contributions and broad participation must be recognized as an integral part of research excellence.





Pantheon, Rome

“Excellence R Us”

The narrative of "excellence" is pervasive in the research community and is often central in research funding decisions. However, Moore and colleagues (<https://www.nature.com/articles/palcomms2016105>) have recently shown that in its unqualified usage, "excellence" is a pernicious and dangerous rhetoric that undermines the very foundations of good research and scholarship. Indeed, this singular focus has led to intense reliance on metrics that aggrandize the power of historically already powerful institutions and nations, to the detriment of Europe (and research) as a whole.

(/). By shifting focus towards "soundness, capacity-building, and breadth and diversity of activity

~~MENU (/)~~

(<https://www.nature.com/articles/palcomms2016105>)" we can redefine excellence to recognize and reward diversity and creativity in research and innovation across all of Europe. To explore where our current system is leading us, and where we instead would like to go, let's start at the frontlines: with researchers themselves.

Grim prospects for early-career researchers

There is a generation of European researchers that are being largely excluded from the research system of their country of birth. This is not only due to the lack of opportunities for permanent positions and the increased inflow of researchers into the academic system, but also due to the stagnating research funding landscape of the past decade and the often rigid and anachronistic hierarchy of academia. These issues have led to what has been called the "lost generation of academics (<https://anglejournal.com/article/2018-10-whats-next-for-the-lost-generation-of-academics-towards-a-sustainable-academic-system/>)". In Southern and Eastern Europe in particular, researchers struggle with high levels of job insecurity, which has a considerable negative impact on talented and experienced researchers.

Therefore, although there is great potential, Europe does not fully capitalise on the knowledge that is produced. As a 2017 report (<https://eua.eu/resources/publications/344:ambitious-funding-for-excellent-research-in-europe-post-2020.html>) from the European University Association (EUA) shows, there are still large geographical imbalances in participation in the current EU research funding programme, representing an enormous waste of talent and capacity for European research and innovation.

Capitalising on European knowledge

An interim evaluation

(https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/sites/horizon2020/files/h2020_threeyearson_a4_horizontal_2018_web.pdf) of *Horizon 2020*'s main achievements has provided some insights into these clear discrepancies. For example, it highlights that

(/). the problem of geographic imbalances is complex and goes beyond North/South or East/West divides. Not only has country participation varied across different thematic priorities of *Horizon 2020*, but also within member states' regions, a so-called centre/periphery divide. The result is that top researchers in these “underrepresented” areas cannot fully engage or achieve their potential, and Europe as a whole loses out.

To start to address this important challenge, the European Commission last year launched the work programme "Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation (http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/wp/2018-2020/main/h2020-wp1820-sewp_en.pdf)". Based on a “Composite Indicator of Research Excellence”, the European Commission identified “low research and innovation (R&I) performing” or “widening participation” countries. Moving forward, it must be high priority to rectify the low representation and low mobility of researchers from these countries, as they represent a seriously underutilized resource with unique experiences and backgrounds which may be crucial for tackling the complex and multifaceted challenges of today and tomorrow.

Broaden participation to enhance research excellence

Horizon Europe will continue to fuel research through, for example, the European Research Council (<https://erc.europa.eu/>) (ERC) and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (<https://ec.europa.eu/research/mariecurieactions/>) (MSCA), the latter being one of the European Union's flagship initiatives to provide research grants to researchers at all stages of their career, across all disciplines. Part of the solution to broadening research excellence and participation should come from additional funding. For example, the success rate for one of the main MSCA research funding schemes have been steadily decreasing and the success rate for some of these research grants are now approaching only 10%. For example, the success rate (https://ec.europa.eu/research/mariecurieactions/msca-numbers_en) for the research fellowship MSCA-IF-EF-Standard was just below 20% in 2014 and have now dropped to around 14-11% in 2017 and 2018. The same trend is observed for many other funding schemes.

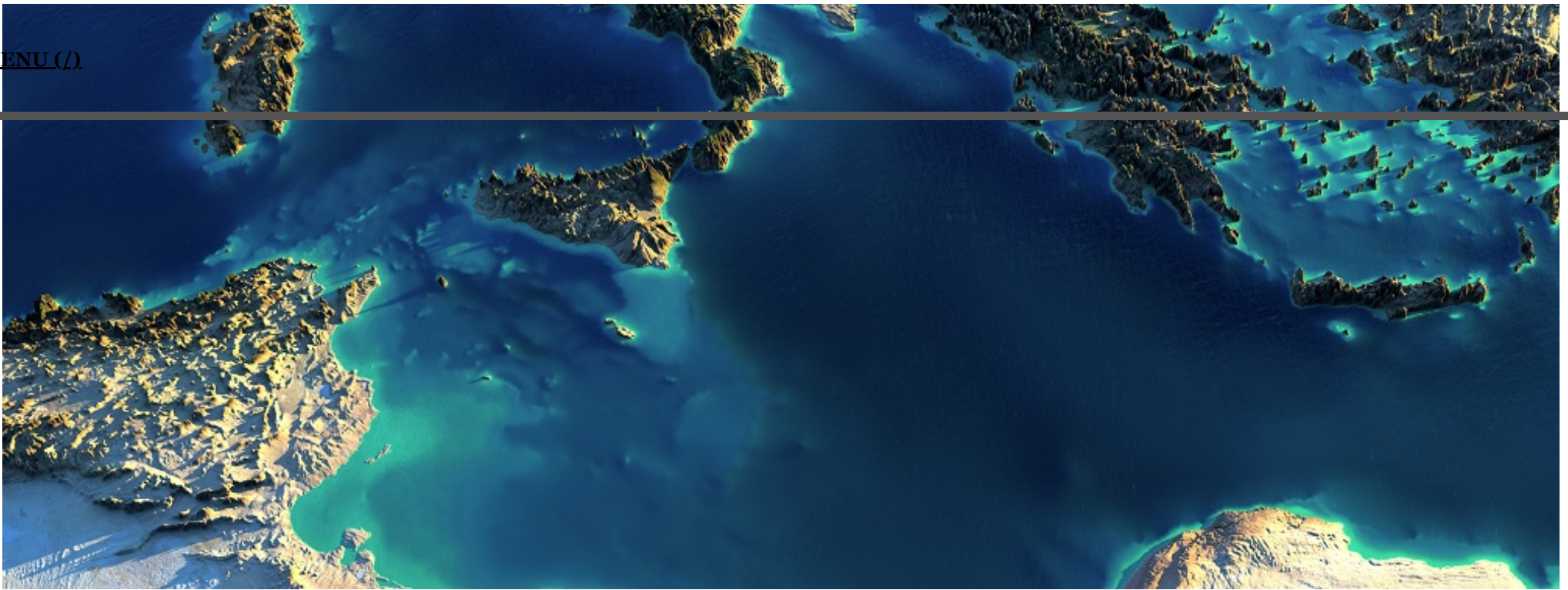
(/). These hypercompetitive research funding rounds represent an enormous waste of talent and effort which needs to be ~~MENU (/)~~ addressed. One potential solution that is being explored to drastically reduce time and effort wasted within the current system (i.e., without large influx of extra funding) is through “threshold mechanisms” and “partial lotteries” (<https://journals.plos.org/plosbiology/article?id=10.1371/journal.pbio.3000065>).

In addition to supplementary funding supporting engagement of emerging researchers from “low R&I performing” countries, a greater share of European structural and investment funds should be set aside for researchers in “low R&I performing” regions. This includes for efforts such as mentoring programmes, learning platforms and on-site training targeted towards research support offices. For example, this can be achieved by expanding existing programs such as teaming (<https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en/h2020-section/teaming>), twinning (https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/tenders/twinning_en) and ERA chairs (https://ec.europa.eu/research/era/era-chairs_en.html), and by supporting the reinforcement of recently implemented initiatives such as the ERC Visiting Research Fellowship (<https://erc.europa.eu/funding/additional-opportunities>).

The result would be a considerably widened geographic participation which in turn would provide a substantial step forward towards a more cohesive and inclusive European Research Area. The full implementation of the European Research Area is a main research policy objective of the European Union, as per Article 179 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:12012E/TXT>). The multiannual framework programme (FP), as per article 182 of the Treaty, represents the main support instrument for implementing research at EU level. Surprisingly, these two *Pillars of Hercules* marking the access to the concept of European Added Value have historically evolved independently from each other (see here (http://www.apre.it/media/494829/miur_espofp9_def.pdf) and here (http://www.ricercainternazionale.miur.it/media/27663/italian_vision_document.pdf)): the transnational research, supported by European financial resources and involving multiple Member States (and Associated Countries) across the whole of Europe and beyond, is instrumental not only for leveraging the achievement of a fully functional European Research Area,

(/). but also for Europe to be part of a Global Research Area (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/moedas/announcements/europes-voyage-towards-open-global-research-area_en) that embraces global and open science.





Relief map of Europe from the Mediterranean Sea to the Baltic Sea Anton Balazh and NASA

Improving prospects for researchers

The trend of limited long-term career perspectives for researchers will have a long-term impact on European science and society. There have been few measures taken in Europe to support the career prospects of researchers: some countries have succeeded in training and marketing PhD researchers for other sectors, but an EU standardised policy, especially considering recognised and established researchers, remains lacking. A model of good practice is the recently adopted policy for the recruitment of MSCA researchers (as well as recipients of ERC grants) at Italian universities and research institutions. Institutions will be able to directly recruit winning fellows for a tenure-track professorship thanks to an Italian Ministerial decree (<http://attiministeriali.miur.it/anno-2015/dicembre/dm-28122015.aspx>) that supports the salary of MSCA grant

(/.) recipients after the conclusion of their project. This important achievement boosts the impact of the MSCA on researchers' careers. While currently there is not yet any equivalent initiative in other European countries, this should be a model for others to follow.

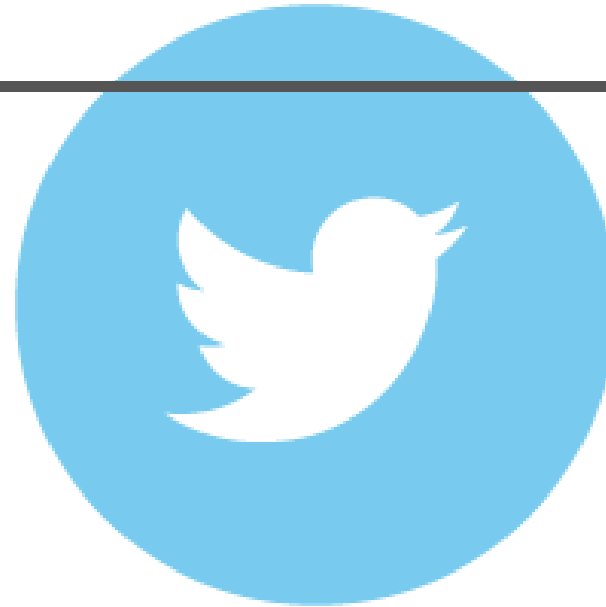
Excellent global reputation

Europe has built a global reputation as a world leader in research and innovation. With *Horizon Europe*, Europe can once again show leadership. A key part of this is actively working to reduce and remove discrepancies between participating countries across Europe. Promising developments are already occurring, but we can accelerate these by embracing a broader perspective and redefining what “research excellence” entails.

A critical part of this is that we modernize how we recognize and reward good research and researchers by capturing more diverse contributions. Good practical starting points include the Open Science Career Assessment Matrix (https://ec.europa.eu/research/openscience/pdf/os_rewards_wgreport_final.pdf) from the European Commission and the incentivization blueprint (<http://www.orfg.org/incentivization-blueprint/>) from the Open Research Funders Group. These starting points should also be combined with an engagement with the broader ongoing discussion (<https://www.nature.com/collections/kzffqpcdch>) around research excellence and assessment. The goal is that excellent researchers in *all* of Europe will be able to fully take part of and contribute to regional, European and global research, which is crucial for fully realizing Europe's potential.

Note: This article is published under a CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Share this article



When referencing this article, cite as follows:

Bellia, A. (2019, Feb). Redefining excellence to overcome geopolitical imbalances in research: To realize Europe's full research potential, we must broaden research excellence to recognize and reward widening participation.. *Angle Journal*. Retrieved from <http://anglejournal.com/article/2018-12-overcoming-european-geopolitical-differences-for-the-future-of-research-to-realize-europes-full-research-potential-the/>

Related Topics

[Geopolitics \(/topics/geopolitics/\)](/topics/geopolitics/)

[Researching Development \(/topics/researching-development/\)](/topics/researching-development/)

[Resources \(/topics/resources/\)](/topics/resources/)

About ANGLE

Tackling global challenges, one issue at a time. From energy and the environment to economics, development and global health, our expert contributors look at all angles. ANGLE focuses on the intersection of science, policy and politics in an evolving and complex world.

(/). **Follow us**

MENU (/).



(<https://www.facebook.com/angleiournal>)



(<https://twitter.com/angleiournal>)



(<https://www.linkedin.com/company/anglejournal>)

Biography

Angela Bellia

Angela Bellia is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Researcher at the Institute for Archaeological and Monumental Heritage at the Italian National Research Council where her current research is on using archaeoacoustics for the study of intangible cultural heritage. She has a PhD in Musicology and Musical Heritage from the University of Bologna. She is Chair of the Archaeomusicology Interest Group (<https://www.archaeological.org/interestgroups/24730>) and Chair of the Events & Network Working Group of the Marie Curie Alumni Association (<https://www.mariecuriealumni.eu/>).

Did you enjoy reading this?

Get our latest articles straight to your inbox!

Enter your email here

Keep me informed!

We will send you updates by email with a handpicked selection of our latest articles every couple of weeks. And not to worry: you can unsubscribe at any time and we will never share your email address.

Angle (/about/)

Tackling global challenges, one issue at a time. From energy and the environment to economics, development and global health, our expert contributors look at all angles. ANGLE focuses on the intersection of science, policy and politics in an evolving and complex world.

Partners



[\(http://www.imperial.ac.uk/security-institute/\)](http://www.imperial.ac.uk/security-institute/)



[\(https://www.imperial.ac.uk/global-health-innovation/\)](https://www.imperial.ac.uk/global-health-innovation/)



[\(https://www.imperial.ac.uk/grantham/\)](https://www.imperial.ac.uk/grantham/)



[_ \(http://www.imperial.ac.uk/schisto\)](http://www.imperial.ac.uk/schisto)

About Angle (/about/)

[_ Editorial Team \(/about/#team\)](/about/#team)

[_ Opportunities \(/about/#jobs\)](/about/#jobs)

[_ Contact us \(/about/#contact-us\)](/about/#contact-us)

Submission Guidelines (/about/#submission-guidelines)

Archive (/latest/)

Follow us



[_ \(https://www.facebook.com/anglejournal\)](https://www.facebook.com/anglejournal)



[_ \(https://twitter.com/anglejournal\)](https://twitter.com/anglejournal)



[_ \(https://www.linkedin.com/company/anglejournal\)](https://www.linkedin.com/company/anglejournal)

