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Asia studies in the 21st century

Director's note

Europe is not achieving its Lisbon goals of becoming the world's leading knowledge economy. Member states are making insufficient use of the internal market, while problems continue to plague Europe's knowledge and innovation policy. Investment in R&D and education remain inadequate, while there is no real mechanism – nor the political will – to implement the Lisbon goals at national levels. To envision the future of funding for Asia studies in 21st century Europe, we must examine how the EU plans to implement its €70 billion *Seventh Framework Programme of the European Community for Research 2007-2013*.

Lisbon envisioned spending 3% of GDP on R&D. Currently 1.90% of the EU's GDP is devoted to R&D, compared to 2.59% in the US and 3.12% in Japan. Closely related to the goal of spending 3% of GDP on R&D was the idea of a European Research Area (ERA), which grew out of the realisation that European research was suffering from three weaknesses: insufficient funding; lack of an environment to stimulate research and exploit results; and the fragmented nature of activities and dispersal of resources. With the realisation of the ERA, European research would become as familiar a concept as the single market or the single currency today. But we have to conclude that the ERA has so far not materialised, and that knowledge and innovation policies remain the domain of the national states. Will the Seventh Framework Programme give the ERA new impetus?

EU officials believe it will. They pin their hopes on the European Research Council and its governing body, the Scientific Council, which has outlined two funding streams: one to establish and support excellence among young independent researchers, the other to support research projects on the frontiers of knowledge. Noting the need for cross-fertilisation at the interface of scientific fields, the Scientific Council intends to support inter-disciplinary research.

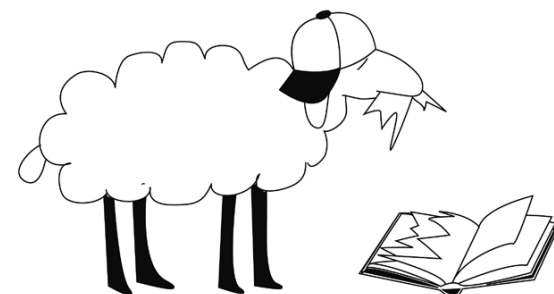
While this is not a bad development per se, I fear that only a sliver of the total budget will be made available to the humanities and social sciences. The Seventh Framework Programme commands €70 billion, 7% of the total EU budget, or about €10 billion a year, to be divided between four categories: 'Co-operation', 'Ideas', 'People' and 'Capacities'. I dwell only on 'Co-operation' as it is the most likely to harbour funding possibilities. Only one of its nine subcategories appears relevant to the study of Asia: 'Socio-Economic Sciences and the Humanities', allotted €800 million out of Co-operation's €45 billion, a little more than €100 million a year. Worse, only one of its seven envisioned items – 'Europe in the world' – can be considered a target for applications, as it aims to understand changing interactions and inter-dependencies between world regions and their implications. It then specifies: especially for Europe.

The future of EU funding for Asia studies thus looks bleak. Most of the money goes to megalomaniac projects in the hard sciences and technology. Worse, its Europe-centered research programme remains mired in parochialism and defensiveness, reinforcing views of us (Europe) against the US, Europe against Asia. Nor can I discern in the latest plan how the problem of translating European initiatives to national contexts will be addressed. Add to this the incapacity of most research institutes and researchers to work together to reach a critical mass to influence science policy in Brussels, and a gloomy picture arises. I even fear that funding for Asia studies will decrease – an absurdity given the rising importance of Asia in the world. Maybe Asia will fund Asia studies in Europe. One thing is certain: the future of Asia studies lies in Asia itself. But we should not forget that the study of Asia is part and parcel of Europe's cultural heritage.

Can the profile of Asia studies be improved in other ways? One avenue is to introduce what is going on in academia to larger audiences through lectures, public discussions, newsletters, TV and radio programmes, cultural events and exhibitions, and through meetings that gather all stakeholders in the field such as the conferences of regional studies associations, the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) and the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS).

Although I will remain secretary general of ICAS, I will no longer be director of IIAS as of 1 September 2006. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone I have worked with since IIAS' foundation in 1993. In particular I would like to thank the board members, members of the academic committee, and my staff – past and present – for their dedication and inspiration. I wish my successor Max Sparreboom all the best. <

Wim Stokhof
Director, IIAS



The International Institute for Asian Studies is a postdoctoral research centre based in Leiden and Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Our main objective is to encourage the interdisciplinary and comparative study of Asia and to promote national and international cooperation in the field. The institute focuses on the humanities and social sciences and their interaction with other sciences.

IIAS values dynamism and versatility in its research programmes. Post-doctoral research fellows are temporarily employed by or affiliated to IIAS, either within a collaborative research programme or individually. In its aim to disseminate broad, in-depth knowledge of Asia, the institute organizes seminars, workshops and conferences, and publishes the *IIAS Newsletter* with a circulation of 26,000.

IIAS runs a database for Asian Studies with information on researchers and research-related institutes worldwide. As an international mediator and a clearing-house for knowledge and information, IIAS is active in creating international networks and launching international cooperative projects and research programmes. In this way, the institute functions as a window on Europe for non-European scholars and contributes to the cultural rapprochement between Asia and Europe.

IIAS also administers the secretariat of the European Alliance for Asian Studies (Asia Alliance: www.asia-alliance.org) and the Secretariat General of the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS: www.icassecretariat.org). Updates on the activities of the Asia Alliance and ICAS are published in this newsletter. <

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