



The most urgent priority for science policy in Europe should be to increase investment in research – Prof. José Mariano Gago

Public funding for research is dangerously low in many countries and collective action needs to be taken, according to Professor José Mariano Gago, a physicist and former Portuguese Minister for Science, Technology and Higher Education.

19 March 2015 – By JON CARTWRIGHT

What was it about Europe that allowed you to be successful in your career?

‘My entire scientific career was developed at CERN (the European Organization for Nuclear Research) together with the Portuguese Laboratory of Instrumentation and Experimental Particle Physics (LIP), which I created later. CERN, an intergovernmental particle physics laboratory, is certainly the most outstanding example of collaborative scientific success in Europe. In its field of research there is no brain drain of scientists to countries outside of Europe; on the contrary, CERN draws in scientists from all over the world who bring their talent, their resources, and their technical and industrial expertise.’

It was in the Second Framework Programme that the European Commission introduced a human resources component to help researchers’ careers. You had a hand in that, didn’t you?

‘That’s a curious story. In 1986, having become the president of the Portuguese National Science and Technology Board, I attended the Council of Research Ministers where I suggested that human resources needed to be made a new priority. At that time, the approval of the Framework Programme by research ministerial delegations had to be taken at unanimity. Near the end of the discussions, my suggestion for

making human resources a new priority in the Framework Programme was adopted and the Portuguese delegation indicated that it was key to achieving a unanimous vote on the whole programme.

‘This bold and unusual position helped the EU to progress. Portugal’s initiative and vote were due to, on the one hand, a commitment to high-level training, particularly abroad, of researchers over a long period. On the other hand, we were convinced that a more European and less nationalistic approach to the doctoral and postdoctoral training of researchers was essential for Europe, and that it would also provide the best external environment for the fast development of Portugal’s science and technology.

‘I am now convinced that the EU programmes for human resources for science and technology have been extremely important for research in Europe, although they are still unacceptably limited in their dimension.’

Why are they limited?

‘The intensity of research and development has been stale for many years, because public funding levels for research are much too low. The EU is not a federal state. When we speak of public funding for research we are therefore speaking mainly of national funding, which in many countries across Europe has diminished or remained dangerously limited. Using our collective efforts to overcome this problem must be a priority.

‘Overall, qualified human resources for science and technology are today the most precious asset for the EU and for each of its nations. Preserving, expanding and improving such an asset, nationally as well as internationally, should, in my view, be recognised as the most urgent issue for science and technology policies in Europe.’

In your role as Portugal’s Minister for Science and Technology, you promoted scientific education and culture. Do you think this will ultimately improve the European research environment?

‘Yes, absolutely. One of the projects in Portugal in which I have been involved is Ciencia Viva, which is a national movement to help develop opportunities for scientists and non-scientists to interact. It has empowered science teachers across the country while promoting experimental science education and close ties between schools, science centres, and research laboratories.’

More info