

## **Open message to the European Commission concerning the Human Brain Project**

**July 7, 2014**

We the undersigned members of the European neuroscience community are writing to express our concern with the course of the Human Brain Project (HBP). The HBP, and its cousin the U.S. BRAIN Initiative, have the noble goal of making major advances in our understanding of both normal and pathological brain function. Given the potentially enormous benefits to society that would be gained from achieving this goal, it deserves a significant collective investment of our societies' resources.

However, the HBP has been controversial and divisive within the European neuroscience community from the beginning. Many laboratories refused to join the project when it was first submitted because of its focus on an overly narrow approach, leading to a significant risk that it would fail to meet its goals. Further attrition of members during the ramp-up phase added to this narrowing.

In June, a Framework Proposal Agreement (FPA) for the second round of funding for the HBP was submitted. This, unfortunately, reflected an even further narrowing of goals and funding allocation, including the removal of an entire neuroscience subproject and the consequent deletion of 18 additional laboratories, as well as further withdrawals and the resignation of one member of the internal scientific advisory board.

A formal review of the HBP is now scheduled to evaluate the success of the project's ramp-up phase and the plan for the next phase. At stake is funding on the order of 50M€ per year European Commission for the "core project" and 50M€ in "partnering projects" provided largely by the European member states' funding bodies.

In this context, we wish to express the view that the HBP is not on course and that the European Commission must take a very careful look at both the science and the management of the HBP before it is renewed. We strongly question whether the goals and implementation of the HBP are adequate to form the nucleus of the collaborative effort in Europe that will further our understanding of the brain.

It is stated that the review must address the excellence, impact as well as the quality and efficiency of implementation. We believe that a review will show that there are substantial failures to meet these criteria, especially concerning the quality of the governance demonstrated and the lack of flexibility and openness of the consortium.

In order to carry out the upcoming review in the most transparent and accountable manner possible, we hold that it should meet the following criteria:

- The panel should be composed of highly regarded members of the scientific community whose views reflect the diversity of approaches within neuroscience.
- The review process should be transparent: review panel members identities should be disclosed and the goals, procedures and output of the review process should be public.

- The panel should be independent: the members of the panel should not be involved in the development of, advocacy for, or governance of the HBP; they should provide a signed disclosure of any significant funding or scientific relationships to the HBP.
- The EC must by regulation evaluate if the HBP is meeting the core criteria of the FET Flagship Project, including scientific excellence, impact and quality of implementation. We call attention to concerns raised by the sparse community support and systematic loss of HBP partners that appear highly relevant to the FET criteria of:
  - Extent to which the consortium enables fostering complementarities, exploiting synergies, and enhancing the overall outcome of regional, national, European and international research programmes
  - Quality of the proposed governance and management structure
  - Openness and flexibility of the consortium
- Based on this review, the panel should make binding recommendations concerning the continuation of the HBP as a whole as well as continuation of individual subprojects, including the allocation of resources across subprojects and the possible creation of new subprojects.
- The panel should be tasked and empowered to create a transparent process for the formulation of the calls for partnering projects and the review of applications for those calls, such that these reflect community input, are coordinated with the core but are independent of the core administration.
- One or more members of the panel should continue to serve as the core of an external steering committee for the period of the funding under review. These continuing members would need to be fully independent of the project (i.e. receiving no funding).

In the case that the review is not able to secure these objectives, we call for the European Commission and Member States to reallocate the funding currently allocated to the HBP core and partnering projects to broad neuroscience-directed funding to meet the original goals of the HBP—understanding brain function and its effect on society. We strongly support the mechanism of individual investigator-driven grants as a means to provide a much needed investment in European neuroscience research. The European Research Council would provide a well-proven mechanism for allocating such funds.

In the event that the European Commission is unable to adopt these recommendations, we, the undersigned, pledge not to apply for HBP partnering projects and will urge our colleagues to join us in this commitment.

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