

Editorial

A European Research Council for all sciences: a dream that may come true

On October 21 and 22 this year, the scientific community represented by the life sciences, physics, mathematics, social sciences and humanities met at The Ireland Academy for the Sciences and Humanities, to discuss the European Research Council (ERC) initiative and to generate a document reflecting the views of the whole scientific community on the creation of an ERC, its general principles and its structure, as well as the specific needs of each discipline with respect to research grants and infrastructures. Present at the meeting were representatives from the ERC Expert Group (ERCEG) established by the Danish Minister for Science, Technology and Innovation, Helge Sander, the Commission, the European Science Foundation (ESF), international organisations, national research councils as well as the scientific community in general.

At the meeting, Achilleas Mitsos (Director General Research) presented the views of the European Commission – not the European Union (EU) – concerning the ERC. He stressed the need for a major effort (fund) for basic research in the context of the new European knowledge-based initiative as stated in the Lisbon and Barcelona declarations. The funds may come from community money and could be included already in the Financial Perspective next year. Most importantly, Mitsos placed the scientific community at the centre of an ERC, as in the Commission's opinion, scientific quality and excellence must be guarded. In November this year, the Commission will produce a communication on the role of basic science, and a more complete paper on the ERC will be presented in April/May 2004 for debate during the Dutch Presidency of the EU. Needless to say, the presentation was well received by the participants, although it was not clear which mechanisms will be used by the Commission for consultations with the scientific community. M. Flensted-Jensen

and F. Mayor, representing ERCEG, also emphasised the need for a European fund for fundamental research that promotes excellence.

An important outcome of the meeting was the realisation that the scientific community, through its economic support and engagement, had provided a much-needed Forum to discuss science policy issues. The Forum has been instrumental in maintaining the continuity in the ERC discussions, and has grown to accommodate the opinion of all the stakeholders. There was a clear consensus among the participants about the need to think European, to join forces, and to set up clear directions for how to proceed in order to ensure the success of the ERC initiative. Towards this aim the assembly appointed a working group that comprises B. Andersson (ESF), J.E. Celis (FEBS, ELSF), J.P. Connerade (Euroscience), J.M. Gago (FEBS working group on the European Research Area), F. Gannon, (EMBO), F. Kafatos (EMBL), P. Tindemans (Euroscience), R. van Duinen (ESF), and L. van Dyck (ELSF). The group will have its first meeting in Brussels on November 4, 2003 to discuss the preparation of a joint draft document stating the position of the whole scientific community concerning the ERC. The document is expected to comment on the Commission and ERCEG reports, which are due in November and December this year. The working group has also been requested to prepare the ground for another ERC interdisciplinary meeting in February 2004 where the draft document will be discussed.

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