

Editorial

The European Research Council: The ‘Mayor Group’ report and the Commission’s views on basic research and its impact

European science is experiencing one of its most exciting times in recent years with the beginning of the new millennium being marked by a renewed interest in basic, fundamental research as a means to sustain a knowledge-based society. This all started at the Lisbon Summit in 2000, where the European Union’s (EU) heads of government, concerned with the increasing gap between Europe and the competing economies in the USA and Japan, decided to take on the challenge by pledging to make Europe the most competitive economy in the world by the year 2010. This pledge was followed by a commitment at the Barcelona Summit to increase the R&D and innovation budget in the EU to reach 3% of the GDP by the same year.

The framework in which these actions are to be carried out was provided by Commissioner Philippe Busquin, who proposed the concept of the European Research Area (ERA), a vision that addressed the fragmentation of science in Europe by encouraging national member states to co-ordinate and integrate their activities in order to achieve the critical mass of expertise and resources necessary to sustain, on a competitive basis, the conversion of knowledge into tangible economic and social benefits. Basic research in Europe is seriously under-funded, limiting our capacity to generate new knowledge, to attract top scientists to the area, as well as to support the industry. As a consequence, our brightest young students have a tendency to look towards the USA as the place of choice to develop their potential.

Currently, there are great expectations for the possible creation of a European Research Council (ERC) for all sciences, a new funding instrument for supporting high-quality fundamental research that may become a cornerstone of a new knowledge-based society. The European scientific community has discussed the initiative at various occasions during the past year and has eagerly awaited the report of the ERC expert group (ERCEG), appointed during the Danish presidency of the EU in 2002, as well as the communiqué from the European Commission on basic research. These communications can be found at <http://www.ercexpertgroup.org/> and <http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/whatsnew.cfm>, respectively.

The report of the ERCEG, now known as the ‘Mayor Group’, proposed the establishment of a European Fund for Research Excellence and an ERC to manage it. Furthermore, the report suggested that the sum of 2 billion euro per year would be necessary to make an impact on basic research. This money should come directly from the EU as a specified item in the budget for the next Framework Programme (FP), rather than from other existing national and European programmes. Most importantly, the report emphasised the need

to safeguard the autonomy of the ERC, as well as to fully involve the scientific community both in the peer review system and in defining the delivery mechanisms.

The Commission paper also recognised the need for supporting basic research in Europe and proposed to introduce the new funding mechanism along the lines delineated by the Mayor Group in the budget of FP7. The communiqué also underlined the need for infrastructures, for increased support to develop human resources, and for increased collaboration and networking. To achieve these goals, the Commission plans to initiate debates with the scientific community, as well as within the Council and the European Parliament in early 2004. Thereafter, there will be a second communiqué with the view of putting forward a proposal for FP7.

Considering the above described developments, one would expect the scientific community to be thrilled about the prospect of having additional funding made available, allowing it to compete for and to deliver on the political expectations of making Europe a highly competitive knowledge-based society. Unfortunately, however, this is not the case as many leading European scientists feel that they will be plunged into complex and heavy bureaucratic machinery if the new funds are implemented through the Commission programmes. According to the Mayor Group, the new Fund should support “investigator-driven research of the highest quality selected through European competition”, which may not be possible according to the present rules. Writing a successful application for FP6 requires a lot more than just good science¹, and as a result many scientists have decided not to apply to the new EC instruments. It is still possible, however, that through the forthcoming consultations with the scientific community the Commission may take a more radical look at the way it runs the FPs, and will implement mechanisms that will ensure that funds are granted solely based on scientific excellence. This may not be simple, but even if so, I still think that many scientists would prefer to have the ERC at arm’s length from the Commission. To administrate the ERC is one thing; to manage the science involved is another.

The scientific community will meet in Brussels on February 22 and 23, and some of these issues will certainly be discussed there. Above all we must think European and work towards the successful implementation of an ERC. We should not lose track, however, of the primary motivation that triggered these

¹ See for example the comprehensive book recently advertised by Hyperion Ltd, *How to write a competitive proposal for framework 6: A research managers handbook*. £130.

events, i.e. the need to close the scientific gap between Europe and the USA and Japan. This will require a strong commitment at all levels.



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