

An NIH/NSF for Europe?

The hottest topic on the agenda of European science administrators and scientists is the recent proposal for the creation of a European Research Council (ERC). The idea is to establish a Europe-wide funding agency, which will support research projects based only on the criteria of the proposals' scientific quality and the applicants' proven track record. Such a system, probably modelled after the US National Institutes of Health or the US National Science Foundation, would certainly do a lot to increase competition among European scientists and thereby improve the quality of research in Europe. This is a laudable goal and some prominent European scientists have already come out in its favour (*Science*, **295**, 443–446, 2002; *EMBO rep.*, **3**, 292–295, 2002).

So what has happened since this idea was floated? The European Science Foundation has mandated itself to discuss this concept and has set up an expert group that is preparing the terrain for a major meeting on this topic next year. The heads of the European research councils are also getting into the act. The Danish government, which will hold the EU presidency for the second half of 2002, has organised a meeting on the topic for October 2002, and another preparatory meeting recently took place in Stockholm. A lot of opinion-forming and position-taking indeed. As everybody is stirring the pot, I thought that I would add my herbs to the stew.

So the main question is: do we need an ERC? For the life sciences, the answer in my opinion is yes, for several reasons. Biological research has become much more complex and takes place at an ever accelerating rate. Traditional research is increasingly benefiting from high-throughput approaches, which means more and more complex collaborations than previously was the norm. These will increasingly take place in a country outside one's own. This actually makes sense. Science is the most global of all enterprises, so it should not be restricted to the area under the auspices of your national funding agency.

Another rationale for establishing an ERC is the fact that knowledge-based economies are the future. The European ministers, building on the enthusiasm for the European Research Area, collectively proclaimed in 2000 at their meeting in Lisbon that they want to make Europe the leading knowledge-based economy in the world. Open-ended research and sufficient funding is a prerequisite for this, and the ministers supported their ambitious aim with a commitment to reach a national spending level of 3% in all member states by 2010.

Many thought that the EC's Framework Programmes, when they were started, were *de facto* an entity which could be viewed as an ERC. Time, mutation and greater awareness of the underlying motivation and justification of the Framework Programmes have shown that they are focused on the delivery of programmes that aim to increase European competitiveness. This is a noble aim, but one that excludes many research projects. The strong linking of research to utility that has characterised the EC Framework Programmes has moved research forward in some areas; but spotlights on some actors means that there is increasing gloom for others. European plant research, for instance, has seen an abrupt curtailment of funding. If and when experts in plant science are needed, they may no longer exist or they may be working in the technological 'dark ages'.

Looking to the supposedly green fields on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, many scientists regret that there is no European NIH or NSF. An ERC that is open to all topics could overcome the limitations of the Framework Programmes. It would also make Europe a more attractive location for scientists who are at the early and most productive stage of their careers.

An alternative to an ERC would be for the national research councils to act in harmony within their programmes to achieve a federal research policy. However, there are some limitations to this.

One is the fact that with 24% of national research being paid for through the Framework Programmes, there is the danger of nationally over-focusing on some areas of research, as outlined above. Nonetheless, there could be an essential role for national systems within an ERC's granting process. It might be wise to rank applications on a national level first before they are judged on a European level. The analogy here is the Olympics. Being the best in your country is very satisfying; but being the best in the world, after having competed against your peers, means much more, and everybody's standards are raised in the process.

The ERC will, I believe, come into existence within the next 5–10 years. In the meantime, it is worthwhile remembering that there are successful schemes in place which could act as pilot projects. At EMBO, for instance, we make our funding decisions solely on the criterion of quality, and we have the confidence of the scientific community as well as the support of the governments of the 25 countries organised into the European Molecular Biology Conference. Additional research grants for our or other organisations' current programmes might be a pragmatic step that would allow the ERC concept to be tested in a pilot scheme. It might also be one way to ensure that the supporters of the ERC concept do not get worn down by conference fatigue or compromise before the opportunity presented by the current political conjunctures is lost. The ERC will come into being in due course and its arrival will be very much welcomed by European scientists. But, in the meantime, the schemes that are already in existence should not be forgotten, as they are also primed to respond to the new possibilities and needs of European science. EMBO, for one, is ready to bid for these Olympics.

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