

The European Research Council: where are we now?

Given the fact that *EMBO reports* has a worldwide readership, I return a little apologetically to the topic of the European Research Council (ERC). But although this may have direct consequences only for our European readers, its creation will potentially have a huge impact on world science, similar to that of the National Science Foundation or the National Institutes of Health, USA. I discussed this topic previously ("Does Europe exist?" *1*, 197; 2000; "An NSF/NIH for Europe" *3*, 497; 2002), but an update seems timely as a lot of things are happening right now, and the scientific community needs to be informed about the complex political and practical aspects of this idea.

At first glance, the concept is simple: to establish a new entity in Europe that will focus on basic research. There is a large consensus of opinion that European science needs such attention and that Europe needs to deliver a higher quality of basic research than is achieved at present. But even this simple concept of improving the quality of research has given rise to much discussion. Do we mean basic research in this context or investigator-driven research? Is non-basic research excluded? I think the clear answer is that many forms of research can be accommodated by the ERC, but we should not shy away from saying that basic research—research that is motivated by the search for greater understanding and knowledge—should receive special attention.

The next issue of debate arises with the question "Why Europe and not individual nations?". We are still in the early stages of working together in Europe, and there are differing interpretations of how we should do so. The federalists believe that individual nations form the core of any European operation, whereas others increasingly think of Europe as a single entity. The unsolved question of where the 'centre of gravity' should lie has led to further disagreement and, more

importantly, to a lack of action. But behind this national versus European debate, there are also practical elements. Some larger nations, with a strong research base, have a lingering distrust of selection processes when they are centralized in 'Europe'. The European Framework Programmes are often cited in this context. Indeed, if the goal is to support high-quality basic research then scientific criteria alone should rule the selection processes of an ERC, and this must be a core value that is not subject to discussion.

Interestingly, this is the message that is coming from almost all quarters. 'All' agree that the ERC should focus on funding high-quality research on the basis of Europe-wide scientific competition ("Evolution in action" *EMBO reports*, *4*, 336–338; 2003). The primary role and responsibility of scientists in delivering such an entity is stressed. Furthermore, there is a strong consensus on the scope of an ERC: research grants, career development and infrastructure, and possibly the creation of research institutes, are all accepted as needs that it should address.

But the debate is far from over. The difficult questions remain of who should found the ERC, how much funding it should receive and where the money should come from. Many supporters have pitched a price tag of at least €1 billion per year to cover all areas of science, including the social sciences and the humanities. It is a nice round figure, but it will need some justification. How many grants and of what value are needed? Does this figure include international fellowship programmes that already exist? The question of where the money should come from creates a lot of finger pointing, of course—the EC (European Commission) says that, although they could help, their Framework Programmes are not the appropriate funders of an ERC, and they suggest that this is a task for the national research councils. The European Science Foundation, the collective

of the national research bodies, has a similar stance: they can provide some money, but they are not responsible for the financing of European activities. Both have valid points. The Framework Programme has the task of increasing the competitiveness of European industry. The national research councils promote national science. It follows that the ERC will only come into existence if there is political will at a high level to make it happen. This 'will' seems to be there, but it is still not clear whether it is strong enough, which is another reason for continued discussions. Assuming it is, one could imagine the financing coming from various sources: from an increase in the EU (European Union) budget for research (a 1% shift from the agriculture budget would be almost sufficient), from increased national support for research (see "Government rhetoric and their R&D expenditure", *EMBO reports*, *4*, 117–120; 2003) or from the Framework Programmes. On paper, this seems feasible. Eventually, the founders will define themselves by providing the money and justification to establish an ERC.

The timetable is almost fixed. By 2006, both the overall EU budget and the next Framework Programme will need to be decided. The current EC Commissioner for research, who supports the idea of an ERC, will end his term in 2004, at a time when many of these discussions will be at a crucial phase. The target, therefore, has to be next year, which also ties in with the report that is due from a group of experts established by the Danish presidency of the EU. Apart from this deadline, there is another reason: if we have not reached a decision by the end of 2004, then battle fatigue will set in and the proponents will be overcome by the defenders of the status quo. And that would be a poor outcome for Europe, I believe.

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