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“Delivering Science in Society”

‘Towards a European Research Council’

A further contribution to the debate

The Board of the Academia Europaea, acting on behalf of the Council, have been pleased to authorise the publication of this opinion in the name of the Academia Europaea.

Jürgen Mittelstrass
President
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Towards a European Research Council: A further contribution from the Academia Europaea

Background

In our response to the Danish Presidency of October 2002, we welcomed the concept of a European Research Council, but stressed the importance of building such an entity onto the strong foundations that already exist¹. These foundations include amongst others, the existing world-class intergovernmental institutions of EMBL, EMBO, ILL, CERN and others, and the collaborative frameworks of COST, EUREKA and the European Science Foundation (ESF). Collectively, all of these serve to give Europe global research excellence. All have major, but different contributions to make to the creation of a genuine European Research Area. We stressed the need for any ERC to add clear value to these existing strengths and to build upon these strong foundations. We also stressed the major benefit that the Community programmes of Framework have had, in particular in forging a genuine pan-European approach to research and training and especially in the fostering of a highly mobile cadre of young scholars.

In that contribution, we proposed four guiding principles for a ERC. These included; independence and transparency of governance; clarity of purpose; a focus on fundamental knowledge and scholarship of the highest order across all disciplines of the natural and human sciences and a responsibility for ensuring the genuine mobility in training and scholarship of young researchers.

Current context

Since that Copenhagen conference, the European Science Foundation (ESF), has taken their own thinking further. The report of the Sykes' group² makes specific recommendations on structure, governance, financing and related matters – a blueprint for an ERC. The EUROHoRCS³ in a recent paper also supported the ERC concept, in terms of a contribution to the furtherance of research quality, breadth of discipline and as a champion for operationally independent, science driven research.

The Academia Europaea welcome the view of the EUROHoRCS and although with some reservations on the issues of structure and governance, we agree with the conclusions of the Sykes' group as it relates to the general mission of a ERC.

¹ See the academia website www.acadeuro.org for the full text of that submission.

² ESF position paper, May 2003. "New Structures for the Support of High-quality Research in Europe".

³ The group comprising the heads of European research funding agencies, councils and equivalent bodies.

Further contribution to the debate

1. Guiding principles

The Academia Europaea again wishes to stress the essential need for any ERC to have a clear and unambiguous mandate. We feel that without (as yet) a clear political agreement on a mandate and a clear set of guiding principles, it is too soon to prescribe on systems of governance or operation for a ERC. Therefore, discussions on preferred or specific systems of governance and operation are in our view premature.

We suggest the following:

- That the real added-value of a ERC will come from a focus on support for research and scholarship at the fundamental, knowledge generating level. Acting [always] in response to curiosity and looking at the longer-term. This should be coupled with a clear responsibility for promotion of a genuine European research and scholarship training capacity.
- There should be no pressure on a ERC to justify its decisions in terms of applicability or exploitation potential. Nor should any ERC be tainted or burdened by the need to respond to political expediency or short-term issues, through the provision of scientific advice for policy or other purposes. Many such bodies and avenues already exist that can provide this.
- There should be a clear demarcation between the objectives for the ERC and the Community programmes of research support. Duplication and competition should be minimal, except for where any such intervention by a ERC would provide the best way of responding to scientific drivers. This principle should equally apply in connection with other intergovernmental and international research bodies. Collaboration should be the main priority.
- The ERC should not play any “supervisory” or other audit role in relation to national or international funding organisations, for example benchmarking and review of other body’s programmes. Such a function might risk reducing the opportunity to forge beneficial collaborations.
- Irrespective of eventual structure and governance: any ERC should operate in ways that ensure excellence and transparency. There must be a guarantee of independence of action, which is substantially free from the political process, including of the Commission, European Parliament and other institutions. Existing international research bodies are both specialised and focussed on specific areas of research, or they are heavily dependant upon national administrations or agencies for their overall policy and direction. We therefore conclude that it would be inappropriate for a ERC to be forged from any one of the existing international organisations, particularly as a ERC should have a broad remit that encompasses all areas of science and the humanities and social sciences.
- An (over-) emphasis on supporting research through thematic and directed programmes, as is now commonplace in a number of member states at national levels, should be avoided. Whilst development of thematic programmes has a role to play, any ERC should concentrate efforts and resources in developing research and scholarship excellence, wherever this originates. The principle focus should be on enabling a bottom-up response

driven mode of operation, allowing scholarship and science to drive the funding process.

- Whilst a role in regional capacity development may be valuable, a ERC should not be an agency charged with the operation of any “educational structural funds” on behalf of the Commission. Such a role would necessarily bring it directly into the political arena. These matters should as now remain ones of subsidiarity and EU competence.

2. Financing

There would appear to be a general consensus emerging that a ERC should support fundamental (curiosity driven) research and that such a body must be responsive to the scientific community and the drivers of science “at the leading edge”. Realisation of such a mission, puts financing clearly within the ambit of the public sector. At the European level, the need for operational independence and sufficient finance to make an impact globally would seem to us to argue strongly for 100 percent Community financing as a way to share such a burden across Europe. There should be no diminution of resources applied to the existing international bodies that are already foci of excellence in their respective fields. Nor, should financing be a line in the legislative acts of the Framework programmes. A genuine commitment to the creation of a ERC should come through a separate political agreement to commit new money in support of a ERC out of the community budget. Such an agreement would make a significant contribution to the realisation of the Barcelona declaration and Lisbon targets for European research capacity.

3. The way forwards?

Several organisations have made proposals^{2,3,4} for how to establish the ERC. For example:

- A flexible, ad hoc collaboration between some or all of the existing international agencies and bodies that currently fund research programmes at the European level.
- The staged creation of a separate “treaty” or intergovernmental organisation, that combines some elements of community financed programmes, with collaborative co-operation.
- A full integration of all of these bodies, that would draw into one entity, the combined efforts of all of the existing organisations and a substantial part of EU community financed research programmes.
- The *ex nihilo* creation of a new entity, with significant ‘guidance’ by the ESF.
- Transformation of the ESF into the ERC.

The Academia Europaea strongly favours the creation of a totally new European Research Council body. All of the existing organisations we

⁴ ESF position paper. April 2003; Greek Presidency document (May 2003). “The European Research and Innovation Area –The Way Forward”. Ministry of Development, General Secretariat for Research and Technology. “Towards a European Research Council?” Schregardus P.A and G. J. Telkamp. Netherlands Institute of International Relations September 2002.

describe here, have been established to serve different goals and most, have over time won for themselves and their research communities a global cachet and significant outreach. These valuable positions must be protected against any loss of impact that might result from a forced amalgamation into a new, untested and *per force*, more general research funding body. We feel certain that the creation of a new ERC would be the best way to achieve a sustainable European Research Area. A new body would be better positioned to build collaborative efforts and co-operative partnerships to promote the very best in European research and scholarship, especially if given a remit that focuses on fundamental and curiosity driven research and which nurtures European excellence wherever it occurs.

The Academia Europaea now urges the research Ministers of the European Union to collaborate in enabling the establishment of a independent European Research Council

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