

The European Research Council Expert Group (ERCEG)

Status and perspectives as by May 2003

The European Research Council Expert Group (ERCEG) was set up on the initiative of the Danish Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation, Helge Sander during the Danish EU presidency. It was as a follow-up of the debate in the Council of Ministers on the status of the European Research Area (ERA). A Conference in Copenhagen, organised by the Danish Research Councils in October 2002, made recommendations on the basic principles of a possible ERC. Important inputs to the discussion also include contributions from the EU Research Advisory Board (EURAB), from the European Science Foundation (ESF) and from the ELSF-meeting in Paris in February 2003.

The task of the Expert Group is to further discussions on the purpose and scope of a European Research Council and to explore options for its possible creation. The Expert Group shall deliver its report to the EU research ministers by the end of 2003.

The Expert Group has had two meetings and, in my capacity of chairman, I have found it appropriate to make a brief preliminary summary of its main ideas so far, in order to provide an input to ongoing discussions about an ERC in various European fora. The following text must not in any way be seen as the final report nor even as a definite statement on the positions of ERCEG. It is, however, a first step in bringing up the issue for a broader discussion in political fora and in academia.

ERCEG will prepare the first draft of its full report during the summer of 2003. The draft will be widely circulated, and consultations will be held with national ministerial representatives, European research organizations, university organizations, scientific academies and other interested groups and persons. On the basis of these consultations the report will be finalised at the end of the year and subsequently be presented to the European research ministers.

In the academic community, our work has been met with keen interests and vivid expectations from many sides. In our final report we will comment on some of these reactions and try to outline what ERC could - and could not - do in these respects.

Let us stress that the main motive for the European scientific community to support establishing the ERC should not be what can be phrased: 'give us more money and leave us in peace'. The motive should be a belief in the need for a new European research policy approach to research funding, in order to make the European Research Area a success.

Madrid May 18th 2003

Signed Prof. Federico Mayor

Chairman of the ERC Expert Group

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The European Research Council

Views of the European Research Council Expert Group, ERCEG

The European Research Council (ERC) should be a specific and autonomous entity

- sponsored and mainly funded by the European Union
- accountable to EU and to other funding partners
- guided by the European scientific community and run by leading scientists

Its main task should be on the European level to strengthen the ERA, especially in researcher-initiated endeavours; to overcome fragmentation of efforts; and to encourage high scientific quality through competition on the European level within all sciences including the humanities and social sciences.

The ERC may also provide advice on scientific matters to governing EU bodies. It should also take responsibility for a European input to global research projects ('speaking with one European voice').

In addition, it should promote science and research education and training, in concert with national authorities, in order to strengthen the scientific culture throughout Europe.

Build a strong knowledge base for Europe

Once it was Europe that formed the forefront of research, but she gradually lost her leading position and has now dramatically fallen behind, especially in the amount of funding and in some areas of scientific productivity, when compared with the US. At the Lisbon and Barcelona summits, the EU set ambitious new strategic goals in creating a European Research Area (ERA). There were two main reasons for this initiative:

A strong base of research and knowledge is needed for the economic development and growth

(Keywords: Lisbon summit declaration; knowledge-based economy; ERA; Barcelona summit; 3% of GNP for R&D).

A strong base of research and knowledge is needed for a harmonious cultural and social development

(Keywords: knowledgeable, thoughtful, generous and critical society; democracy; awareness of international problems; developing countries; career challenge)

In order to draw social and economic benefits from scientific discovery, technical development and innovation, there must be both a strong institutional base of research and mechanisms feeding human competence and research results into society. Experience shows that no region or country has been able to sustain a high level of innovation and economic growth without having a strong basis in scientific discovery as well as an ability of transforming it into useful knowledge.

It takes many actions and instruments to build a strong research base in Europe within the ERA. The particular need for the ERC stems from the fact that there is at present no general support structure on the European level to promote scientific excellence in basic and investigator-driven research through organising competitions for funding.

European added value can be achieved by addressing issues which are unlikely to succeed within a national context; by raising overall standards of scientific quality throughout Europe; and by providing, on a competitive basis, research funds for users of well-established research infrastructures.

Tasks

The overall mission of the ERC should thus be to promote European excellence in all areas of science including the humanities and social sciences as well as the engineering sciences and to put Europe at the forefront of international research.

The basic tasks for the ERC will be outlined against a careful and systematic analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the present European research systems and the limitations due to their national basis. At least four types of instruments may be considered:

- *Increasing scientific excellence on all levels throughout Europe by organising competitions for funding of leading edge basic and strategic research*

An open European competition will help raising scientific standards throughout Europe while providing incentives and mechanisms for the best researchers and the best research groups to be able to compete successfully on the international scene. On the ERC side this involves a certain willingness to take risks and to prepare carefully for future developments. This will lead to increasing quality and quantity of highly educated, highly motivated and highly competitive researchers.

- *Specific European programmes for research training and mobility in order to increase the number and the quality of researchers for the future*

The ERC would have a special responsibility not only for supporting group research, but also for fostering individual researchers, especially young researchers. This takes careful assessment of possible co-operation with already existing schemes and possible new arrangements.

- *Support for extended and wider access to international, large-scale research programmes as well as of major European or international research facilities and infrastructures*

Clearly the ERC must build on the European strength in specific areas of research in order to realise their full potential and benefits. Existing infrastructures would endure within their current organisational frameworks. But the ERC would offer, on a competitive basis, better and wider access for their use, and it could provide advice for new facilities and assist in setting up of infrastructures also for the social sciences and humanities.

- *New mechanisms for fostering collaboration and co-ordination schemes*

The ERC must be open to the whole research community, including scientists in industry. The ERC has to cover competition, collaboration and co-ordination, with an emphasis on the former, and must play an important role in the continuum which has to be established from education, to research and to innovation bridging to national support structures, while addressing key issues for the development of ERA.

Funding and ownership of the ERC

As a new, European major research policy approach the ERC must be created and sponsored by the Union and its heads of states. The funding should in the main come from the EU budget. New funding is needed and the ERC must not be created at the expense of the present research activities within the national systems and the Framework Programmes.

Such an increase is well in line with the Barcelona goal that the public R&D spending in Europe should increase with a total of approximately 30 Billion Euros before 2010. A small part of this proposed increase should be used to set up and run the ERC.

It is desirable that a new EU treaty provides for the possibility of a direct funding of the ERC in the EU budget. The ERC funded by the Union must evidently be accountable to the Union (and to other sponsors) through its governing body. It is important that this ownership is made specific and unambiguous. In establishing the ERC and funding it in large part through the EU, it must be avoided to fall under regulations of a regular EU-agency.

The ERC should be founded as an autonomous scientific decision-making body. The Union must realise that it is both advantageous and necessary to exploit the capacity for self-government of the scientific community while fostering a climate of better co-operation between universities and industry within ERA.

Agreements on co-operation with other organisations should be possible and are in fact desirable, while keeping the independence of each. This could lead to important synergy effects and could also help to attract additional funding.

Main features of organisation and governing structure

The governing body of the ERC should be appointed by its sponsors and thus accountable to the political system. In order to achieve its objectives, as stated in its mission, appropriate powers must be vested in the Board, which should include representatives from the political system, the industry and the wider society. Care must be taken to ensure, however, that on the operational level of running the ERC, autonomy and independence is granted in line with scientific standards and conduct.

How to get started

It is our conviction that the ‘political’ decision of EU to help establish and financially support the ERC is a matter of urgency, if the expressed objectives of the EU, according to the Lisbon and Barcelona declarations, should be pursued. The ERC may begin its work with emphasis on catalytic effects, but there is a risk that in place of a single funding body, the ERC would become merely a platform for a multiplicity of already existing, and merely better financed, funding schemes. Therefore, the objective should from the beginning be to establish a body that has the potential and the appropriate organisation to become a major research promoting body in Europe.

Remarks

In its final report the Expert group wants to demonstrate in different ways their analysis of the evidence for the need of the ERC. It will have to explore different options for the concrete way of forming and funding the ERC. Also more alternatives should be outlined for how to run the ERC (principles for the organisation, principles for high quality peer review, appropriate strategic evaluation and monitoring instruments etc.)