

ELSF, UNESCO, EMBO, FEBS “Life Sciences in the ERC – the Scientists Opinion”, Paris, 18/19.2.03

Background to the Paris Meeting:

The possibility of establishing a European Research Council (ERC), complementary to the EC Framework Programme and to the National Research Council programmes, to support high quality basic research on a European level has raised an increasing degree of interest during the last months.

In October 2002, a meeting was held in Copenhagen under the Danish presidency of the EC to discuss whether or not a European Research Council is needed. Other initiatives have been taken, for instance by EMBO/EMBC and the European Science Foundation (ESF).

What is missing at this stage, however, is a clear, coordinated scientific perspective and statement on this topic; hence, the organisation of this meeting where the life scientists would be able to discuss and give their opinions on the shape and form that any such ERC should take.

Meeting Paris, 19.2.03

Four Nobel Prize winners gave their personal opinions on the topic, followed by reactions from the audience. Three panels coming from diverse sources including prominent life scientists, national funding agencies, international organisations and representatives from the European Commission, discussed, with active participation from the floor, some questions that are central to the implementation of an ERC (see program of the meeting). The meeting ended with a plenary session where the results of the discussions were presented to the European Commissioner Philippe Busquin.

Paris Meeting report from Denes Dudits for EPSO:

Leading persons of the European life science research including several Nobel-price laureates and heads of different scientific organizations have analyzed the present position of Europe in life science research in comparison with the American and Japanese activities and financial support systems. There was a general consensus that the competitiveness of Europe could only be insured by the introduction of novel R&D policy and institutional structures. In general, the majority of contributors have supported the concept of ERC. As the details of the foundation and functioning of a council are considered, the meeting failed to outline a defined strategy of activities. Some of the main issues discussed can be listed as the followings:

- Basic science is out of the scope of high priorities of the present common EU science policy, therefore, ERC can take a leading position in supporting long-term, high-risk research, and establishment of infrastructure centers;
- The European countries are urged to increase the number of scientists and the research budget in the future. For the efficient use of the enlarged research spending requires new approaches in the competitive grant system based on scientific excellence, coordination and cooperation between national activities and support of continuous generation of critical mass of talented young scientists. All these tasks can be handled through an ERC.
- Despite of the overall support of the idea of ERC, the concrete features in the foundation and functioning of this new instrument created divergent opinions: several, frequently conflicting views were outlined as the role of EC is concerned. The supportive attitude of the Brussels administration is not evident. The role of existing organizations has not been clarified. The structure and function of national research councils show high divergence. Several countries, mainly the candidate countries lack a national research council even ministry of science. The source of extra funding of basic science is a biggest mystery in the whole initiative.
- For EPSO members it might be important to recognize that human health was suggested as a focus (selling point) for a future ERC policy. So, we may face with the same problems as in FP6.
- Summarizing of my personal impression, the main message is that we can expect a slow progress in initiation of an ERC. It is evident that the support from scientists is not sufficient and the dependence on political decisions generates considerable uncertainties in realization of a good concept.

From EPSO participated: Michel Caboche (FR), Denes Dudits (HU), Helene Lucas (FR), Karin Metzloff

Prof. Dénes Dudits

Szeged, 12 March, 2003