

**EUROPEAN RESEARCH COUNCIL**

*EURAB input to the ongoing debates in Europe on the topic of a possible European Research Council*

**Introduction**

EURAB's view is that if Europe is to reach the goals set out by the European Council in Lisbon (2000) and Barcelona (2002) radical change is needed in building its knowledge-based economy. In particular it needs to achieve world leadership based on three pillars: discovery, innovation and education.

EURAB believes that Europe has the appropriate fundamental research base to provide world-wide scientific leadership, if efficiently organised. This can be achieved by creating a strong competitive process, a "market" for ideas of European dimension, that utilises the full scientific, technological and intellectual capacity of the EU. In this way Europe will go beyond the capacity of what its nations can achieve on their own.

However, scientific leadership can only be successful and sustainable if it is combined with a vigorous development of technological and innovative potential. This combined approach will represent an essential element for European research integration in line with the concept of the European Research Area.

**Organising fundamental research at European level: towards an ERC**

To develop research leadership, Europe needs to overcome its fragmentation, to benefit from the European dimension, to complement existing and new initiatives including the EU Framework Programmes (FPs) and to support the innovation system. Therefore Europe has to:

- Introduce a dimension of fundamental research at a European level
- Support world-class research across broad fields of science and technology by adequately funding scientific excellence through competition at a European level in fundamental research
- Provide elements for a solid and sound science policy and perspective (foresight) in various fields of research
- Provide a central focus for integrating national programmes and, while drawing on the strength that diversity of national structures provides, reduce fragmentation
- Reach critical mass and combine efforts
- Support the implementation of common infrastructures, in an open variable geometry fashion, as a basic tool for world class science. Europe already has

a wealth of research organizations such as CERN, ESO, ESA, EMBL etc. However, the ability to reach a new threshold in European research organization needs competitive funding for the user groups of these facilities.

In this context, the establishment of a European Research Council (ERC), which would efficiently organise and fund fundamental research at a European level and with European scale competition, seems to be an appropriate structure for Europe. Such a Council should not, however, have responsibilities for carrying out research, for research institutes or for research infrastructure operation.

### **Operation and implementation**

Operation of an ERC must have a large degree of organisational independence from governments/ministries and the European Commission. In common with many national grant agencies, decision-taking must be based on scientific judgements and scientists must be trusted to play the dominant role in its governance. Certainly, such independence has to be accompanied by accountability.

Governance, accepting the need for scientific independence of decision making, will depend on the funding structure achieved and will need to include appropriate representation.

The operation of the ERC should be based on the following principles:

- Coverage of all areas of science, including engineering, the humanities and the social sciences, with no constraints on size or participation in the projects.
- Emphasis on the bottom up approach for submission of proposals
- Provision of a rigorous, independent and transparent international peer review process (no “juste retour”) of the proposals, and an ex post evaluation of the projects

The funding of the ERC must be seen as substantial additional “new” money. Finance for the ERC may come from a number of sources – EU, national funds (Government and/or research agencies), and the private sector (industry and also private trusts and foundations). In accordance with the declarations at the European Council in Barcelona in 2002, targets have been set to increase national and European research investment to 3% of GDP, two thirds of which should come from the private sector. The ERC should benefit from this increased political commitment to scientific research investment.

Establishment of the ERC should follow a step-wise procedure using instruments at hand. This would take into account the diversity of national funding structures within European countries, since they are the major funders and pilots of fundamental research throughout Europe. Consideration must also be given to the different structures of research in the various European countries.

The first steps of an ERC should be built on the experience already gained and the further development of instruments such as those developed by the European Science Foundation: EUROCORES and Forward Looks or the Young Scientists Awards Scheme (EURYI) presently being discussed by the EU Heads of Research Councils (EUROHORCs).

## **EURAB Recommendation**

EURAB urges appropriate agencies and institutions within the EU, at both national and European level, to establish a European Research Council. This should be done after in depth debate (including with Europe's scientific research community) and careful planning, and as a significant new contribution to the development of the ERA. It should be adequately resourced, to promote and support excellence in fundamental scientific research through European-wide competition based on the following guiding principles:

- Coverage of fundamental research in all aspects of science, including engineering, the humanities and the social sciences
- Independent scientific decision-making based on rigorous and transparent peer review processes (no 'juste retour') and with ex-post evaluation of projects
- Openness to proposals from individuals and groups without constraint on size or composition
- Accountability to a representative governance structure