



LETTERS

edited by Etta Kavanagh

Crucial Choices for the Nascent ERC

THE DIVERSE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITIES SUPPORTING THE INITIATIVE FOR SCIENCE IN EUROPE (ISE) welcome the steps taken toward establishing the European Research Council (ERC), notably, the appointment of a Scientific Council of 22 outstanding scientists. Many important decisions must be taken in the coming months to ensure that the ERC meets the high expectations of the community as a truly autonomous agency that funds fundamental research in all disciplines on the basis of scientific excellence, while guaranteeing that the public funding provided for it will be prudently managed.

The choice of legal structure for the ERC will be vital. An “Executive Agency,” established and staffed predominantly by employees of the European Commission (EC) recruited through open competition and detachment, is one option; the alternative is a structure that is independent of the EC but in which all member states are represented. The ISE agrees with the pragmatic choice of an Executive Agency structure, at least for the start-up phase of the ERC, with the possibility of changing the legal structure following an independent assessment after 3 to 5 years.

Despite the Commission’s role in establishing the agency, the ERC must be substantially independent of the EC and, crucially, must be allowed to function outside the standard procedures of the Framework Programmes. In this regard, the leading role of the new Scientific Council must be rigorously respected; the Executive Agency must act under the authority of the Scientific Council. As a consequence, it appears imperative to us that the choice of the director of the Executive Agency must be based on proposals made by the Scientific Council. The alternative, whereby the EC chooses the key officers, would put at risk the trust between the Scientific Council and the Executive Agency that will be essential to earn, in turn, the trust and respect of the wider scientific community.

The new ERC has the opportunity to engage European researchers in a way that the Framework Programmes have so far failed to do. The Executive Agency must grasp this opportunity by choosing procedures that best serve the needs of science in Europe: Applications must be evaluated solely on scientific merit, the application and reporting procedures must not overburden scientists with administration, and funding must be through grants, like those of the national funding agencies, rather than, as is currently the case in the Framework Programme, through contracts with rigid deliverables and milestones, which are counterproductive to the unpredictable frontier research.

Finally, although no decision on the level of financing of the next Framework Programme has been announced, we know that budget negotiations point to a significant reduction in funds for research by the European Union, possibly including the ERC. In any event, the ERC must have a budget that is commensurate with the important task in hand—to stimulate basic research and

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increase the competitiveness of Europe. This budget should be at least €1 billion per year in the first years and grow quickly to €1.5 to 2.0 billion per year (the size of the larger national research council budgets) within the 7-year Framework Programme. A smaller budget than this could seriously undermine the ERC. Funding of this magnitude, i.e., at least €9 billion, should be earmarked for the ERC in the Framework Programme budget.

The temptation to reduce ERC funding to protect existing actions, however valuable, or to transfer to the ERC the charge of delivering other parts of the Framework Programme (without the associated budget) must be resisted. If the budget is inadequate, the success rate of applications will be too low, many important projects will not be funded, and the best researchers will not apply for grants or participate in the peer review process. All of these would doom the nascent ERC.

THIS LETTER IS ENDORSED IN A PERSONAL CAPACITY BY THE PRESIDENTS, CHAIRS, AND DIRECTORS GENERAL OF 57 EUROPEAN ORGANIZATIONS IN ALL SCIENTIFIC DISCIPLINES UNDER THE AEGIS OF THE INITIATIVE FOR SCIENCE IN EUROPE (FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, SEE WWW.INITIATIVE-SCIENCE-EUROPE.ORG). THE COMPLETE LIST OF SIGNATORIES IS AVAILABLE AT WWW.SCIENCEMAG.ORG/CGI/CONTENT/FULL/311/5765/1240B/DC1.

Objectivity in Science

OBJECTIVITY IS A CORNERSTONE OF SCIENCE. Bias can erode objectivity when unwittingly introduced into the reporting and teaching of discoveries and theories. This is evident in articles and books on evolution today and may contribute to difficulties in the acceptance of evolution by many supporters of intelligent design.

Science has not yet developed to the point of being able to assign purpose to activities in the natural world. In fact, it may never develop to that level. Yet purpose is often implied in descriptions of DNA replication, and this introduces bias.

Scientists generally agree that there is no purpose in evolution. The evolutionary process moves along as a result of interactions among and between components of various levels of organization: populations, organisms, molecules, atoms, and subatomic particles and