

Editorial

Does Europe exist?

First published online 7 November 2000

The European Commissioner Philippe Busquin recently published a document entitled 'The European Research Area' (<http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/research/area.html>), in which he outlines a vision of the European Union (EU) acting as a single research entity. This ambition is similar to other developments – most specifically to the establishment of the Euro – and could ultimately lead to the growing together of the EU member states. The advantages of working in a multinational manner are most obvious for smaller countries, where an adequate research infrastructure is not as easily achieved as in the larger ones. Indeed, a number of the smaller economies have been so dependent on funding from the EU that they are already accepting the general lines of research policy coming from 'Brussels' rather than developing their own.

But the probability of this laudable plan for a European research area coming to fruition is relatively low. As one of the comments on the proposal states, such a vision is likely to fail because of 'technology nationalism'. This is neither an exaggeration, nor a surprise. For many years, national research councils have fashioned their programs to provide scientific output with the aim to create, *inter alia*, new jobs and wealth for their own countries. And apart from sheer inertia and conservatism, a shift from a national, inward-looking perspective to one responding to larger structures is a major challenge even for Europhiles. Associated with such a change is the de-motivating factor of losing independence. But obviously, the same fears and difficulties arose when the introduction of the Euro was discussed. If the EU is meant to exist as a single entity in the research area then the boundaries erected between member countries must be lowered analogously.

As an interim step, it might be good to preserve national systems but to put into place a parallel European Research Council. Such a concept has been proposed by European scientists as they look with envy towards the USA. There, the NIH, with its study sections and system of peer review, has provided a high-quality selection mechanism that has yielded profitable results in both research and commerce. A European Research Council similar to NIH or NSF could be financed directly with modest contributions from each member state's budget for scientific programs. Panels that would use scientific excellence as the sole criterium for funding could be established to review the submitted proposals. Each research group would be judged on its abilities as proven by its track record and the quality of its proposal.

So why has such a plan not received serious support to date? The answer may go beyond national self-interest. It may reflect the national research councils' suspicions that

the EC is unable to deliver such a program because of its sensitivity to the social and industrial needs. The scientific communities may also lack confidence in the selection panels and methods used for the EC framework programs. On a less noble level, it may reflect the wishes of the heads of research councils to retain and maximize their own local budgets. Of course national agencies could and should support local researchers, but submission to a Europe-wide selection process would bring a new and stimulating degree of competition. Local heroes are important, but if they are not performing at an international level, they and their peers should be made aware of it. Local needs must have been a component of other European debates (Euro included) but the outcome is that the European interest, to which all member states are 'Maas-trichted', was best served by joint action.

Non-European readers may find these considerations strange. However, the obvious inefficiency (to put it mildly) of a scenario where Wyoming, IA, USA, etc., have individual research programs should make it clear why it is an important issue. The development of US funding policy is of great significance, because it is a major factor in defining the speed at which knowledge and its associated benefits are obtained. Indeed, the spectacular increases in the NIH and NSF budgets send positive signals to scientists everywhere. Sufficient funding allows researchers to focus on their long-term research rather than just putting together a portfolio of their projects piecemeal. If the world of science benefits from the positive policy decisions made in the USA then the same will be true if changes are made in European funding. For this reason and because it would be another step towards uniting Europe, scientists would, I believe, clearly and overwhelmingly endorse the creation of a European Research Council. The stimulation of true competition within the EU would help to identify those scientific groups of real excellence. The consequences can only be positive.

Frank Gannon

Executive Director of EMBO

*European Molecular Biology Laboratory, Meyershofstrasse 1,
69117 Heidelberg, Germany*

Fax: (49)-6221-384879.

E-mail: gannon@embl-heidelberg.de

This article was originally published in *EMBO Reports* (2000) Vol. 1(3), p. 197, and is reprinted with permission from Oxford University Press.