

## Editorial

# Promoting basic research in Europe

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The Initiative for Science in Europe (ISE), a group established at the European Life Science Forum (ELSF)-EUROSCIENCE Dublin conference on the European Research Council (ERC), organised a meeting at the European Parliament (EP) in Brussels on 21–22 February, to reiterate the need for establishing an ERC/facility to support high-quality basic research in Europe. The meeting was sponsored by the ELSF, the Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft, and the European Science Foundation (ESF), and was attended by Nobel Laureates, representatives from all scientific disciplines (life sciences, natural sciences, humanities and social sciences), the universities, industry, the ERC Expert Group (ERCEG), the Commission, and the EP. Topics addressed included: why an ERC?, instruments and delivery mechanisms, the ERC in the real world, what do we mean by an ERC and finally, does the proposed ERC meet the needs?

The contribution by Achilleas Mitsos, Director-General of the Commission's Research DG, was eagerly awaited, as the Commission's communiqué on 'Europe and Basic Research' ([ftp://ftp.cordis.lu/pub/era/docs/com2004\\_9\\_en.pdf](http://ftp.cordis.lu/pub/era/docs/com2004_9_en.pdf)) recognised the need for supporting basic research in Europe, and signalled support for introducing a new funding mechanism in the context of framework programme 7, with funds coming directly from the EU along the lines suggested by the 'Mayor Group' report (<http://www.ercexpertgroup.org/>).

Indeed, Mitsos told the audience that the Commission had a few weeks ago adopted the financial perspectives 2007–2013, which propose a 60% increase in the budget for research by 2013. The proposal, which he made clear took a balanced approach – i.e. no increase for a given item to the detriment of other priorities – included five areas for which additional funding was needed: (1) policy-driven collaborative research as we know it today, (2) co-operation and co-ordination of policy and programmes, (3) building research capacities (infrastructures, human potential), (4) technology platforms and (5) promotion of basic research.

In terms of basic research, Mitsos outlined some pre-conditions that in the Commission's opinion must be fulfilled. For instance, decisions related to scientific areas, topics, etc., should – according to the Commission – be science-driven and not policy-driven. Furthermore, excellence should be the exclusive criterion for funding projects; there must be competition at the European level. Finally, we must move towards grants as a funding mechanism as the cost-sharing model creates much bureaucracy, a topic that has been of major concern to the life science community (<http://www.biomed-central.com/news/20040227/03/>). Mitsos mentioned that the Commission would present a second communiqué in May containing details about how the ERC/facility may be organised and implemented. Also, he stressed the importance of

proving that there is a case for promoting basic research at the European level, since in his opinion the final decision will be a political one. How the Commission plans to organise the consultations with the scientific community in such a tight schedule remains a matter of much concern, as Mitsos was not yet prepared to elaborate on this topic.

The meeting also featured presentations by representatives from the various scientific disciplines, including two Nobel Laureates, the ERCEG group, industry, as well as two members of the EP. The industry representative, H. Soboll, Director of Policy Research at Daimler-Chrysler, reiterated that the industry needs basic research and told the audience that we may expect industry as a partner. In his opinion, however, money for basic research could be better distributed through existing mechanisms rather than through a new facility. R. Linkohr, Member of the EP for Germany, did not endorse this view and warned the participants that if the ERC falls into the hands of the Framework programmes there will be all sorts of problems. In his opinion, decisions should be left to scientists, who should be courageous enough to ask for what is needed and flexible enough to accommodate all variables.

Summarising the event, the Portuguese former Minister for Science and Technology, José Mariano Gago, praised the role that the scientific organisations, working together, have played in taking the ERC discussions to where we stand today. In this context, he highlighted several matters where he thought the assembly has reached consensus. These included: (1) human resources – a substantial increase is deemed essential if we are to reach the Barcelona target, (2) R&D, the need to increase funding at all levels, and to reach an equilibrium between basic research and targeted research, (3) national research councils must accept the ERC, (4) all scientific disciplines must work together, (5) industry and academia must come together, (6) the need for a sensible mission statement and (7) the facility must use a combination of instruments. According to Gago, the debate has just begun, and he urged the scientific community to be prepared for a lively political debate at the national level.

Even though the idea of a European basic research facility, with funds provided through the EU budget, is widely accepted by the various stakeholders we still need a political mandate for basic research in Europe. In this direction, the Irish Presidency of the EU in collaboration with the Commission recently organised a meeting in Dublin Castle on 'Europe's Search for Excellence in Basic Research'. At this meeting, The Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Mary Harney T.D., invited Ministers for Research and senior ministerial representatives from EU Member, Acceding and Associated States, the EC, and representatives from national research councils, the scientific community, and industry, to discuss issues concerning promotion of basic research, and to identify areas of consensus at the European level. Among other things, it was agreed "that the Commission should bring forward to the Competitiveness

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Council proposals for the governance, management and accountability of a European initiative. This initiative, which must have the complete trust and confidence of the scientific community, should involve a new facility characterised by minimum bureaucracy, involve the scientific and engineering communities, both enterprise and academia, in its strategy and overall management. It should award individual grants on a competitive basis”.

Given the outcome of the high-level Dublin Castle meeting, the Irish Presidency was committed to advance basic research in Europe, and placed the item on the agenda of the Competitiveness Council that took place on 11 March in Brussels. The provisional Council conclusions can be found at [http://www.eu2004.ie/templates/meeting.asp?sNavlocator=5,13&list\\_id=224](http://www.eu2004.ie/templates/meeting.asp?sNavlocator=5,13&list_id=224). In the part of the provisional document on Europe and Basic Research, the Council “ACKNOWLEDGES the need, in the context of the preparation of the next research framework programme and taking into account an analysis of the respective merits of existing national approaches and a possible European initiative, to examine the case for specific funding within that Programme to support basic research of the highest quality. At the same time, an appropriate balance should be maintained with other priorities, approaches and activities in research, technological development and innovation”. The document also “NOTES the intention of the Commission to bring forward, by May 2004, an initiative on operational mechanisms which should add value to existing national approaches and provide a European dimension, with the objective of reinforcing the creativity and excellence of basic research in Europe, through encouraging more competition at the highest European level amongst individual research teams while enhancing cooperation between national programmes.” Finally, the document acknowledged the role of the scientific organisations in promoting basic research in

Europe. Clearly, the political process is now under way and it is now up to the Commission, the Competitiveness Council and the EP to make sure that we hold on to the promise of making Europe a knowledge-based society.

As far as the scientific community is concerned, the executive committee of the ISE – which now has elected Gago as its President – will produce a document summarising the position of the scientific community as a whole. The document will be presented to the President of the EU, the Commissioner, and the President of the EP, as well as to Heads of Government and Ministers of Research of the EU Member, Acceding and Associated States. There will also be press conferences in each EU country on the occasion of the press release.

ISE is also arranging a plenary session on the ERC at the EuroScience Open Forum (ESOF2004; <http://www.esof-2004.org/>) in Stockholm on 25–28 August. The latter is the first pan-European Forum for discussing science and technology issues and their impact on society. Likewise, FEBS is organising a meeting on the ERC in the context of the Acceding States and Central and Eastern European countries. This event will take place in Warsaw on 29 June as part of the 29th FEBS congress (<http://www.febs2004.pl/>).

