



European Life Sciences Forum

Meeting **Life Sciences in the  
European Research Council**

**The scientists' opinion**

**Summary of the meeting**

With the support of  
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UNESCO Fontenoy Building • Room XII  
Place de Fontenoy 7 • Paris 7ème • France

The meeting entitled “Life Sciences in the European Research Council – The scientists’ opinion” that was organized by the European Life Sciences Forum (ELSF) at the UNESCO division of basic and engineering sciences and funded by FEBS and EMBO, brought together over 250 participants from 20 countries in Europe. This turnout was remarkable given the short period of notification and was the first indicator that the scientific community, and in particular the life scientists, welcomed an opportunity to express their views on the topic of a European Research Council (ERC). The meeting was structured in a very open manner. Four introductory keynote speeches were followed by three targeted panel sessions and the meeting ended with a plenary session on related topics and a final address by the European Commissioner, Philippe Busquin. In all, about 30 formal presentations were made and there were over two hours of discussion generated by input from the participants at the meeting. There was no indication prior to the meeting as to the viewpoint of any of the participants and this, of course, could have given rise to a very conflicting outcome. This was not the case and indeed the first major outcome that has to be reported is that there was total consensus on the need for a European Research Council. This view of the life sciences community appears to be broadly represented and can, it is suggested, be taken as a final position on that over-riding question.

Diverse reasons were presented for the establishment of an ERC; these included, in the order they were presented at the meeting:

- The need to provide freedom for researchers to undertake difficult and challenging projects with long-term goals. (This point was made by many including Christiane Nusslein-Volhard, Nobel Prize winner and keynote speaker)
- The need to complete the European Research Area.
- The need to add support for fundamental, basic or investigator research at a European level (all three words were used interchangeably) to the existing instruments of national research council support and the EC Framework Programme support (both of which should also be maintained).
- The need to provide a context for attractive investigator-driven research that may be particularly necessary to ensure that the best young scientists remain in Europe.
- The need to increase the quality of research in Europe through competition.

- The need to recognize that bottom-up research has been the source of most of the practical benefits to society that have arisen to-date. This approach also provides greatest satisfaction to the scientific community.
- The need to provide a new mechanism to support research infrastructures. The fact that SwissProt is now dependent on funding from the USA was viewed as a development of particular concern.
- The need to provide freedom of choice and flexibility to the scientific community.
- The need to have funding choices based primarily on scientific quality, with quality control and selection being carried out by scientific peers.
- The need to remove all obligations as to how a research project is constructed and obstacles to the way in which it is conducted (e.g. remove requirements for specific partner types or combinations, no obligation to create trans-national research axes for any reasons other than scientific ones).
- The need to encourage scientists to perform risky but fascinating research that will yield the most novel results.
- The need to implement effective project administration with a minimum of bureaucracy.
- The need to organize a programme based on a high trust system.
- The need to provide an environment that will attract scientists from all over the world.
- The need to provide extra funding for research in general.
- The need to stimulate international cooperation.
- The need to ensure that Europe trains the extra 500,000 – 800,000 new scientists and engineers required to reach the Lisbon goal of Europe becoming the world's leading knowledge-based economy and the Barcelona goal of a European average approach at 3% of GDP expenditure on research and development.
- The need to support all science (including social sciences and the humanities for long-term projects).
- The need to improve the level of training of the scientists in Europe.
- The need to bring into existence more world-class institutions in Europe.
- The need to promote competition not only between scientists but also between funding agencies and models of support for research.

- The need to integrate research in different areas.
- The need to increase the attractiveness, to the next generation, of scientific careers in Europe.
- The need to address structural problems including salary levels of scientists.
- The need to increase the quality of research such that the problems of society can be addressed more effectively.
- The need to increase the intellectual property capital in Europe.
- The need to provide a basis for innovation such that new spin-offs can be established and mature companies will be encouraged to retain their science in Europe.

This litany includes most of the points that were made at the meeting and it provides a flavour for the basis of the broad consensus that exists within the scientific community for the need to establish a European Research Council. In fact, this component of the meeting could be well summarized from the quote from Victor Hugo used by Francois Gros, keynote speaker:

*“Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come”.*

### **Actions that should be covered by the European Research Council**

Although the core action of the European Research Council has been consistently presented as support for basic research (and hence implicitly the provision of research grants or awards) a strong case was made, particularly, by John Sulston, Nobel Prize winner and keynote speaker, to ensure that support for infrastructures would also be included in the menu of activities of the ERC. Certain infrastructures (examples given included SwissProt, the European Bio-informatics Institute (EBI) and the European Mutant Mouse Archive (EMMA)) are essential to the performance of research tasks by all scientists in Europe. They need a consistent and sustained funding basis and the disadvantages inherent in discontinuity of support should not be under-estimated. It was pointed out that the requirements for infrastructure funding in the life sciences were relatively modest compared with those in other areas and did not involve extraordinarily high levels of expenditure. Concern that long-term, guaranteed funding of infrastructures would lead to loss of competitiveness was seen as being unjustified. In the United States, such services were submitted to regular

open review and, when necessary, the provider is changed as a consequence of an evaluated response to a competitive open call.

In a relatively new departure, many voices also pointed to the need for more high-quality laboratories within Europe. The example of EMBL was cited on a number of occasions, together with the analysis which had appeared just prior to the meeting, which showed that only two European laboratories (including the EMBL) were placed in the world's top 20 laboratories as judged by the quality of their output.

There were mixed opinions on whether the ERC should have any policy role. For some it should be simply a funding agency. For others it would seem important that the ERC should play a role in reducing duplication and fragmentation, which implied some policy-directing role. It also seemed to be an ideal source of advisers for both the EC and national programmes. Indeed, it was also noted that even the selection of topics for calls for proposals (if it was viewed as necessary) or in focusing support for infrastructures, would implicitly carry with it some policy consequences. These are topics that were viewed as a secondary role of the ERC, but ones that will have to require further discussion in the future.

### **Funding and Founders**

The meeting did not focus specifically on the amount of funding which was required. Nonetheless, a number of speakers indicated their views on this topic. The figures given, however, were usually not justified, nor on the basis of their quantitation provided. Rather there was a view that if the ERC was worthwhile starting, then it required a significant funding level, which for many speakers translated into an initial budget of approximately €1 billion per year to cover all activities. It was also stated that the ERC should be funded with new money and, again, the amount of this sum would clearly be related to the source of the funding. The most ambitious figure for the final version of the ERC came from Rolf Zinkernagel (Nobel Prize winner and keynote speaker) who was of the opinion that the ERC should grow to a budget of approximately €30 billion. This figure included a very significant shift of funding from the national to the European-based research council, but was also used to contrast with the sums available for similar funding mechanisms in the United States. Rolf

Tarrach (Head of Eurohorcs) had a much more modest view and thought that a lot could be done simply by redeploying the current funding and using it more effectively.

The source of the funding was also briefly discussed. The view of the EC Commission as presented by Peter Kind, EC, is that the Framework Programme should only play a stimulatory role, however, the possibility of a larger share of funding from Europe, through a redeployment of the overall European budget, seems like one goal that would be welcomed by all parties. Charities and industry foundations were not expected to be major contributors to the ERC, however it is clear that discussions with these sources are at an earlier stage. The national research councils were viewed as possible contributors. However, it was also recognized that they were constrained in their national funding. The extra funding which is projected in the increase of the European expenditure on R&D from 1% to 3% of GDP in the next few years would be a further source of this funding.

The founders remained in very vague outline following this meeting. The European Commission, while being very interested and supportive of the process, did not feel that it was their role to establish it. They suggested that the European Science Foundation (ESF) should take on this responsibility. At the time of the meeting the ESF awaited an internal report and did not present its views. Others however, pointed to the difficulties of the ESF converting itself from its current role, which is firmly embedded in national research councils, to one that was more European. Others pointed to the example of EMBO and suggested that it would be a logical start point for the life sciences. Finally, it was noted that some further changes could take place in the manner in which European science was organized depending on the outcome of the European Convention, the preparatory phase chaired by V. Giscard d'Estaing, which was still being discussed at the time of the meeting and which would define various responsibilities for research in the future expanded Europe.

The meeting included many other aspects that could not be expanded upon here. Many speakers reiterated the need to have all areas of the sciences, including social sciences and humanities, in the ERC. One representative from Slovenia pointed to the dangers of the exclusion of weaker scientific countries if excellence alone was taken as the criteria for selection. Others pointed to the need for a greater engagement by the scientific community in developing practical working plans that

would inform politicians on the mechanisms that would be employed by the ERC and the benefits that would ultimately be derived from the support for it.

It was decided at this meeting that a follow-up series of discussions was required to cover some of these specific aspects and that these could come together with the actions of the Federico Mayor “high-level” committee that was established by the Danish Presidency of the EC, and should provide greater detail on the ERC such that the decision could be reached, in perhaps 2004, on whether or not to start this new activity.

**Frank Gannon**