



European Life Sciences Forum



EUROSCIENCE

Meeting Report

A European Research Council for All Sciences

Sponsored by

Stifterverband
für die Deutsche Wissenschaft



Irish Royal Academy • Dublin • Ireland

Tuesday 21 – Wednesday 22 October 2003

Foreword

In the framework of the European Research Area (ERA), the support for basic research and the establishment of a European Research Council (ERC) are, today, major topics of the science policy debate in Europe. Since its inception in 2002 the debate on the creation of an ERC to promote and support basic research in all scientific disciplines on a European level has gained tremendous momentum. This debate, which was initiated by scientists, has been very fertile with many activities and contributions from learned societies, scientific organizations and other stakeholders, amongst which EuroScience, the European Science Foundation (ESF), EUROHORCs, Academia Europaea, All Academies, the EU Research Advisory Board (EURAB) and many more. The life scientists were particularly active in this context: the European Life Sciences Forum (ELSF) organized two meetings which, on the one hand, demonstrated the support of the life sciences community for an ERC and established the general principles that should govern its actions, and, on the other hand, helped draw concrete plans as to the research grants that should be allocated, the support for infrastructures and centres of excellence, and the delivery mechanisms of the ERC. The contributions of these various organizations can be found at <http://www.elsf.org/elsferc.html>.

The scientific community responded with interest and enthusiasm to the concept of an ERC, albeit in a rather dispersed manner. Realizing that the European scientific community should speak with one voice on the subject, none the least because the ERC should support all scientific areas, the European Life Sciences Forum (ELSF) and EuroScience decided to organize, on 21-22 October 2003 in Dublin, an interdisciplinary meeting to discuss the creation of an ERC, which is the subject of the present report.

The Dublin Meeting

The meeting entitled “A European Research Council for All Sciences” was hosted in Dublin, Ireland, by the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) and co-sponsored by the Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft, ELSF, the Federation of European Biochemical Societies (FEBS), the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) and the European Plant Science Organization (EPSO).

The aim of the Dublin meeting was:

- To inform those scientific communities which were, so far, disconnected from the ERC debate;
- To aim at a common position of the whole scientific community on the creation of an ERC, its general principles and its structure, as well as the specific needs of each discipline with respect to research grants and infrastructures (ERC activities);
- To help create transdisciplinary dynamics in favour of the establishment of an ERC; and,
- Ultimately, through its contributions and activities, help ensure that, if it comes to existence, the ERC truly reflects the needs and expectations of the scientific community.

Some ninety prominent scientists, representatives from major learned societies and scientific organizations and science administrators from across Europe convened in Dublin. The organizations represented included ELSF and EUROSCIENCE, the European Commission, the ERC Expert Group established by the Danish Presidency of the European Union, the European Science Foundation (ESF) and its working committees, the European Physical Society, the European Mathematical Society, the European Chemical Society, Academia Europea, ALLEA, EIROforum (CERN, EFDA, ESA, ESO, ESRF, ILL), EUROHORCs, and other European and national organisations. Hence, the whole spectrum of scientific areas as well as major stakeholders of European science policy participated in the meeting. The background information document setting the frame of the discussion and containing a series of questions that were to be addressed during the meeting is provided in the Annex.

The programme was structured to meet the aims of the meeting: The first part of the meeting was dedicated to introductory speeches setting up the historical framework of the ERC debate and allowed major organizations to present their positions (see programme in Annex). The specific requirements of each scientific discipline with respect to ERC instruments, the delivery mechanisms and the support for research infrastructures were then the subject of preliminary discussions, which were largely based on the work carried out previously by the life sciences community. In this context, an interesting presentation was by Dr Marco Malacarne, Head of Unit for "Research Infrastructures" with the European Commission's DG Research, who highlighted, to the great surprise of most participants, the lack of collaboration of EU Member States towards the development of new research infrastructures in Europe as well as the reduced scope of the Commission's mandate with respect to infrastructures.

Discussions on the second day focused on the founding and funding fathers of the ERC and the delivery structure that should be established. They clearly demonstrated that the scientific community must be closely associated to the definition and the delivery of the programmes if the ERC is to be successful. Another essential point was that the funding should be central

and should not be at the expense of national programmes if the ERC was to gain support from national agencies and scientists in all participating countries.

One of the key moments of the meeting was the presentation made by Achilleas Mitsos, Director General with the EC DG Research, who announced that the Commission was supporting the idea of an instrument for basic research and, for this purpose, would request a specific credit line from the EU budget. This commitment is also witnessed in the communication “Europe and basic research” of the Commission on the subject (http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/press/2004/pdf/acte_en_version_final_15janv_04.pdf), which was released in January 2004. Together with the adoption in November 2003 by the European Parliament of a report by German MEP Rolf Linkohr calling for the establishment of an ERC to support of basic research on purely scientific criteria, this move by the Commission indicates that the European Institutions are indeed considering the establishment and funding of an instrument for basic research in the near future, which could be considered a success for the scientific community.

Conclusions and Follow-up of the Dublin Meeting

The meeting achieved the objectives set by the organizers in that it opened the debate on the ERC to all European scientific disciplines and communities, and that the discussions highlighted the essential role that such a body could play in the construction of a genuine European Research Area. It did not, however, solve all the questions and more discussion is needed, for instance, on the structural elements of the ERC. Other aspects will greatly depend on the source and amount of funding that will be available. Finally, the discussion on infrastructures revealed problems that could only be solved by a conjunction of actors, including the ERC.

One major achievement of the Dublin meeting, however, was the establishment, for the first time in Europe, of a platform where all scientific disciplines (ranging from natural to social sciences and humanities) would discuss policy and programmes. It was subsequently decided to formalize this structure under the name “Initiative for Science in Europe” (ISE) in order to nurture the discussion on these topics and to ensure that the views of the scientific community are well known.

An ISE working group composed of representatives from ELSF and its members, Euroscience, the European Science Foundation (ESF), the Group of European Nobel Prize Laureates, the European University Association and some prominent individuals is now organizing a meeting entitled “European Research Council – An Initiative for Science in Europe”, which will be held in the premises of the Parliament in Brussels on 23-24 February

2004. The objective of the ISE meeting will be to discuss the reasons for establishing an ERC, the views and expectations of the scientific community, notably with respect to the needs of the various scientific disciplines and critical organizational requirements, the interactions between the ERC and other funding agencies and how to address disparities between EU Member States. The meeting will also be designed to inform the Members of the European Parliament, who will have co-decision powers on the establishment and funding of an ERC. Following the meeting, the ISE working group will draft a position paper on these issues, which will be an essential contribution, as it will reflect the opinion of the customers of the ERC, the scientists. Indeed, it seems clear that a successful ERC cannot be envisaged if the needs and requirements of the scientific community are not met. This paper will be submitted for endorsement endorsed by the whole scientific community.

The ISE working group is also committed to pursuing its efforts beyond the Brussels meeting, through lobbying of policy- and decision-makers, but also by organizing a plenary session during the ESOF2004 Open Forum organized by EuroScience in August 2004.

Luc van Dyck

January 2004