

EUROHORCs' key principles for the foundation of a European Research Council

The Heads of national Research Councils in Europe (EUROHORCs), in offering to help set up a European Research Council, herewith define their basic tenets as a benchmark for the objectives and operational processes of an ERC. As a position statement this is intended to speak to the research community in Europe as well as to future "owners" (by which we mean both funders and more general stakeholders) of the ERC.

SCOPE AND OBJECTIVE

There is a strong need for the European states to strengthen their common knowledge base in order to establish a European Research Area as envisioned in the Lisbon Declaration of the European Union. The concept of an agency for the support of basic research, a European Research Council (ERC), as it has been developed by the European Commission in many consultations, forms a cornerstone of the European Research Area. Europe has many first-class universities, scientific institutions and research organisations. Due to fragmented action and to the diversity of national approaches these institutions cannot realize their full potential of scientific excellence. The ERC shall help to advance European competitiveness in research and scholarship on a global scale.

BASIC RESEARCH

The work of an ERC must rest on funding investigator-initiated research which above all has the goal to advance knowledge and understanding. The ERC's scope should encompass all fields of research, including the human and social sciences, the natural sciences, medicine, technology and engineering.

AUTONOMY

The ERC should have a constitution that provides autonomy from the European Commission and governmental authorities in such a way as to apply its own criteria for its structures, procedures and decisions on personnel, policy, and awards. In this context the term "at arm's length" has been used to denote protected independence. The ERC must be free to take decisions on scientific criteria only, based on elements of best practice which represent world-wide standards for Research Councils. Only then will an ERC gain the confidence of the scientific community throughout Europe.

GOVERNANCE

The governance of an ERC must ensure autonomy and flexibility of operations. The ERC needs a highly professional but lean administrative structure which is guided by a governing body (such as a Governing Council). The Governing Council is invested with the necessary mandate. It will be composed of researchers (from academia and also from organizations that are "users" of research, such as industry etc.) of the highest reputation. Although they should represent all fields of research, quotas for particular scientific fields, regional distribution, gender and age must be avoided. There must not be any institutional representation of scientific or other European bodies/institutions.

The Governing Council will hold the ultimate responsibility for funding decisions. It will define the overall strategy, establish new funding instruments and organise follow-up

evaluations of its funding structures and the longer term impacts of ERC-funded research. It will be accountable with respect to its operation to the “owners” of the ERC.

EXCELLENCE THROUGH COMPETITION

The sole criterion for the ERC’s funding decisions must be scientific excellence. This is best achieved through a mechanism of competition and peer review. Only through free and open competition will it be possible to identify the very best researchers and research proposals in Europe and to allocate funds to them according to their needs. Open access for all scientists in Europe will be managed through transparent and accepted quality standards to avoid overload of the institution leading to a weakening or hampering of its procedures and decision-making strength.

INSTRUMENTS

Eventually the ERC must be able to develop the range of instruments that will be necessary to serve the scientific community. However it will be useful and pragmatic to start with only one instrument, the funding of individual researchers with their teams. Teams can have members working in several institutions in different countries. Funds shall be allocated as flexible grants, not through contracts requiring specific deliverables. The grants shall be of significant size in order to denote international recognition and cover the full economic cost of research in relation to the institution where it takes place.

PEER REVIEW

Peer Review is the method of choice for research councils and other funding organizations worldwide in order to establish excellence in research. It stands for scientific assessment by highly recognised experts who are selected for their competence and experience and who apply purely scientific and technical criteria on a comparative basis. The peer review process used by an ERC must be open and transparent. It should be guided by existing precedent set by international “best-practice” as exemplified by the performance of national research councils.

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for EUROHORCs:

Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker
President