



## **ERC Scientific Council Statement**

16 November 2010

### **Looking ahead: preparing the future of the European Research Council**

After three years of successful operations, the ERC has attained a substantial reputation within the scientific community across Europe and worldwide. It has established itself as an essential component of the EU's research funding landscape. Building on these achievements, the ERC is ready to contribute towards shaping its future and meeting the challenges ahead for the European Research Area.

The ERC Scientific Council has recently taken a series of steps with a view to consolidating past experience and responding to present and future European needs. The overall aim is to explore the best possible conditions for the long lasting and sustainable success of its unique mission as a leading world-class funding institution in frontier research.

Towards this end, in line with the Council of Ministers Conclusions of March 2010<sup>1</sup> a Task Force is being set up upon request of the ERC, involving representatives of the Scientific Council and of the Commission as well as two external advisers, to explore the various options and legal possibilities related to the ERC's future governance. The Task Force, chaired by Robert-Jan Smits, Director General for Research at the Commission, will start its work in the coming weeks and will explore, inter alia, the possibilities of firmly positioning the ERC within the European Research Area, taking full account of the new institutional framework defined by the introduction of the Lisbon Treaty. The Task Force will aim at concluding its work well before the decision on the next research Framework programme (FP8) is taken, to allow ample time for the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament to hold a thorough and well-founded debate.

In searching to identify long-term solutions for the governance issues that have affected the ERC in the past, the Scientific Council is convinced that the work of the Task Force will

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<sup>1</sup> Council conclusions on the review of the European Research Council's structures and mechanisms. 2999th Competitiveness Council meeting, Brussels, 2 March 2010. See background information



benefit from the experience gained during the first years of the ERC's existence and of the recent evolution of the European institutional context while laying the foundations for a robust future governance structure.

Considering the breadth and importance of these efforts in view of finding implementable new governance structures, the ERC Scientific Council has requested the suspension of some of the short term adjustments previously foreseen. In particular, it wishes to maintain the status quo of the current organisational arrangements until the Task Force delivers its results, which must include provisions for a transition towards a possible new structure. In line with this request, the preparation for the proposed merger of the two co-existing positions of ERC Secretary General and ERC Executive Agency (ERCEA) Director, recommended by the external review in 2009 and intended as an interim solution<sup>2</sup> in the larger context of addressing the governance issue, has been cancelled and the two functions will continue to co-exist in the present framework.

Accordingly, the ERC Scientific Council will fill the position of Secretary General which has become vacant after Prof. Andreu Mas-Colell decided to return to his academic position at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona in September this year. At its plenary meeting held in Luxembourg recently, the ERC Scientific Council has interviewed suitable candidates and will now finalize with the European Commission the appointment of its elected Secretary General designate.

*"This set of decisions will allow for a smooth and efficient continuation of the functioning of the ERC, while allowing for more time to set up a solid and robust governance structure"* declared Prof. Helga Nowotny, ERC President and Chair of its Scientific Council, in a letter addressed to the Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn.

The ERC has come a very long way in very little time. Since its setting up in 2007, the ERC has already delivered a unique contribution to science and research in Europe, as briefly summarized below.

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<sup>2</sup> See Recommendation no. 4 of the ERC external review : "The Panel recommends that the positions of the Secretary-General and Director be merged. The new position should be filled by a distinguished scientist with robust administrative experience."



## Background information: some facts

- The ERC has to date funded 1600 top researchers (approximately half of them "Starting Grant" awardees), from anywhere in the world, to carry out their pioneering projects throughout Europe, including a 2010 Nobel prize winner. The grants are worth up to 3.5 Mio EUR each.
- Some 2.5 Billion EUR have been granted to ground-breaking, excellent projects in frontier research in all fields of science and scholarship, with already more than 700 scientific publications related to ERC projects.
- The ERC Executive Agency has set up an efficient and fast grant management, which compares favourably with the US's National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH).
- A growing and widely recognised scientific reputation has been achieved, due to the high quality of the ERC's evaluation procedures carried out by top-level international peer reviewers. Several European countries have set up *ad hoc* schemes to reward some of their best non-funded Starting Grant applicants, a trend that also shows the recognition of its peer review.
- The number of applications to the ERC is steadily increasing since 2008, whilst their quality remains very high, and European universities now compete for ERC grantees.
- The ERC has gained a central and highly visible place within the new "Innovation Union" flagship initiative of the European Commission.

Set up in 2007, the European Research Council is the first pan-European funding organisation for basic research at the "frontier" of knowledge. It aims to stimulate scientific excellence in Europe by supporting the very best, creative researchers of any nationality and from any scientific domain, including the social sciences and humanities. The ERC funds both top senior scientists ("ERC Advanced Grants") and younger, early-career researchers ("ERC Starting Grants"). Scientific excellence is the only selection criterion in the ERC's peer reviewed grant competitions. The ERC operates according to an "investigator-driven", or "bottom-up", approach with no thematic priorities or national quotas.

The ERC consists of a Scientific Council, its governing body setting the scientific strategy, and the ERC Executive Agency which implements the operations. The ERC is lead by the ERC President (who is also the Chair of its Scientific Council). The Secretary General is appointed by the Scientific Council and is its permanent representative in Brussels. The Secretary General assures on a day-to-day basis effective cooperation with the Executive Agency and the European Commission. The Director of the ERC Executive Agency is responsible for the implementation of the ERC strategy as established by the Scientific Council and for the management of the Agency and its staff.

In 2009, an independent review panel, chaired by Prof. Vike-Freiberga, came up with a number of recommendations for the ERC, of which one concerned the streamlining of the ERC's governance structure.



On 2 March 2010, the EU Ministers for Competitiveness, meeting in the Council, adopted conclusions calling for the Commission "to carry out by July 2011 an independent evaluation as a follow-up to the Review recommendations. The evaluation should, *inter alia*, deal with the question as to whether the ERC's structure is sufficiently tailored to achieve its mission or whether an alternative structure is called for, and, if necessary, make recommendations on this point that could be implemented by the start of the Eighth Framework Programme".

## Links

ERC website

<http://erc.europa.eu>

Review and development of ERC

<http://erc.europa.eu/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.display&topicID=158>

ERC Striking projects

<http://erc.europa.eu/pdf/PROJECTS-EN-LD.pdf>