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EUROPE: ERC shelves leadership appointment

Jan Petter Myklebust
05 December 2010
Issue: 150

 The European Research Council has shelved the appointment of a distinguished scientist to lead the organisation, 10 months after the position was announced. Instead the Director General of Research Robert-Jan Smiths, who took office at the beginning of July, will lead a task force to explore options for future leadership.

The only candidate remaining for the post after a high-level selection committee had examined 116 applications, Professor Ramon Marimon of the European University Institute in Florence, and a previous state secretary in Spain, has sent a request to the European Ombudsman asking for an inquiry.

A 16 November statement from the European Research Council (ERC) said managerial problems that have blighted the organisation, as reported in **University World News**, would be addressed by the new task force.

Marimon has published a file on correspondence with the EU Commission on his [website](#), saying that "what happened is not so much bad news for me, but for the ERC".

Managerial problems at the ERC became acute in 2009, when a panel of research experts headed by former Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga said it was "deeply concerned" about the governance structure of the council, which was "a source of tension and ongoing low-level conflict".

The recommendation of the Freiberga-led panel was to merge the position of secretary-general of the ERC with the director position, to create a more dynamic managerial position, which should be filled by a distinguished scientist.

Since then, the research-granting ERC has changed its president, when Helga Nowotny took over from Fotis Kafatis in March this year. The Secretary General, professor Andreu Mas-Collel, stepped down on 1 September 2010.

In an interview with **Nature** last month, Nowotny said there were several problems at the ERC "but they all boil down to one main problem - that of governance. We do not have the independence to run the ERC the way a frontier research agency should ideally be run. This is because the ERC was set up with a dual structure." The dual structure comprises an executive agency, and a scientific council of respected European scientists.

As an expert on the use of instruments for research in the European research framework programmes, and the chair of the FP6 evaluation committee delivering the 'Marimon Report' in 2004 on the use of research instruments, Marimon could have been an ideal head for the ERC.



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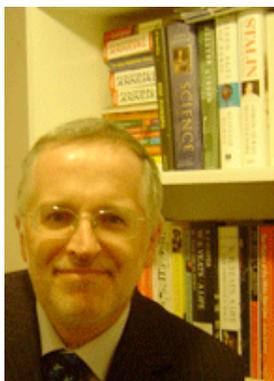
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Martin Ince, chair of the academic advisory board of the QS World University Rankings, argues in the Commentary section that no rankings provide all the answers.

Marimon is an expert on governance and coordination of science and technology policies in the European Research Area (ERA), being an ardent spokesman for governance, trust and more transparency in European research. In particular, he has advocated greater synergy between the EU and ERA member states funding research programmes.

The ERC experiences will be important for preparation of the FP8 research programme, where 'joint programming' is now being piloted as a new instrument financing the "grand challenges" of research in the future.

Marimon has intervened because he thinks that EU Commissioner Maire Geoghegan-Quinn should have answered a letter he sent her asking for comment on the process, and for her advice on whether he should withdraw his candidature.

He has also asked the European Ombudsman to examine possible lack of transparency in the selection process, requesting "a simple inquiry that I would like to pursue, to clarify and possibly take action: have proper administrative procedures been followed?"

Nowhere in the interview, or in the ERC statement, was it stated: why the position (officially welcomed by the ERC scientific council) is an obstacle; if so, why this was not said before the selection process started; what the ERC scientific council had done to effectively abort the selection process; and what guarantees there are that the new 'task force' can achieve more than the independent 'review panel' in 2009.

Asked by University World News if the recent press releases and interview clarify matters, Marimon said: "No. It is common knowledge that there is a need for a more independent agency."

The new unified position could have been a step in this direction.

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Student protests in Sri Lanka, including over private higher education, are hampering reform, writes Nalaka Gunawardene in the Commentary section.



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