

## **EUROHORCs Position Paper on the ERC Mid-term Review**

The European Heads of Research Councils (EUROHORCs) would like to express their strong support of the European Research Council (ERC) and its first achievements in establishing clear benchmarks of scientific excellence and in promoting Frontier Research in Europe.

After two years of operation, it is time to take stock of the early achievements of the ERC, so as to be able to make any appropriate adjustments that may be necessary as well as to debate the actions to be taken in order to ensure ERC's effectiveness in promoting excellence in the European Research Area in the long-term.

The EUROHORCs fully agree with Commissioner Potočnik's statement that "The review of ERC structures and mechanisms should be seen as a very important step in the development of the ERC and beyond that the future excellence and competitiveness"<sup>1</sup>, and would like to thank him for organising the mid-term review according to a timetable that should have enabled it to be conducted within the term of the present European Parliament and completed within the term of the current Commission. We however regret the delays that hampered the process and hope these will not have consequences for the institutional follow-up of this review.

The EUROHORCs wish to take the opportunity of this mid-term review to recall ERC's key principles and to express its concerns on some fundamental matters.

At the very beginning of the debate on the necessity of creating an ERC, the EUROHORCs issued two documents:

- (1) a position paper in June 2004 on the key principles necessary for a European but internationally recognised and competitive funding agency, supporting frontier research and receiving the trust of the scientific community and
- (2) a report in July 2004, written together with the European Commission, developing recommendations based on the national and European experience on the operational parameters of a European basic research initiative.

In both papers, the EUROHORCs insisted on the basic principles on which the ERC should be built, namely: scientific excellence, autonomy, suitable governance, accountability, efficiency, transparency, trust and credibility.

These key principles were taken up in the Seventh Framework Programme as well as in the Specific Programme "Ideas". The EUROHORCs welcome the fact that legislative texts creating the ERC recognise these principles.

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<sup>1</sup> IP/09/307 24 February 2009

On the occasion of the mid-term review EUROHORCs wish to have a closer look at the implementation of the basic principles. This short position statement aims at drawing the attention of the research community in Europe as well as of the political stakeholders on the ERC achievements and on the weaknesses observed. It is our collective responsibility to identify and redress these weaknesses, so that the ERC may be able to live up to the challenge of promoting excellence in the European Research Area. This challenge acquires particular significance in the context of the present financial and economic crisis, since the Lisbon Strategy of establishing a dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy through research is one of the keys for recovery.

In what follows, EUROHORCs present some of observations on the implementation of each of the basic principles they consider essential for ERC.

### **Scientific excellence**

EUROHORCs welcome the fact that the ERC grant schemes encompass all fields of frontier research and aim at promoting excellence.

Overall, EUROHORCs feel strongly that excellence in the evaluation and granting process is a requirement for scientific excellence. The processing of grant proposals, the management of panels and experts as well as the administrative and financial framework of the research projects have a strong impact on the scientific output and should not be underestimated.

EUROHORCs insist that only the peer review system can guarantee an adequate and accepted evaluation of excellence; only recognised scientific experts can serve as judges of the quality and originality of their peers, thanks to their own scientific quality and international stature. Such high-level experts are crucial to the credibility of the ERC evaluation procedures, and consolidate the trust of the scientific community in the new funding schemes of the ERC.

EUROHORCs regret that the long-standing experience in peer reviewing of the national organisations in Europe has not been yet sufficiently used and express their willingness to contribute to the further development of ERC's peer review system.

### **Autonomy and suitable governance**

The questions of autonomy and governance are closely linked and are the two vital items that must be clarified through the mid-term review.

EUROHORCs welcome the strategic autonomy granted to the Scientific Council. The commitment of the European Commission in this respect should be underlined. However EUROHORCs believe that the lack of legal basis could place ERC at long term risk.

EUROHORCs consider that the current structure and mechanisms of the ERC should be strengthened. The ERC's governance should be defined in terms of operational autonomy. The governance must be clearly separated from the political level and its administrative framework constructed to support its purpose.

EUROHORCs believe the Scientific Council should be the governing organ of the ERC and should "*operate in an autonomous and independent manner*"<sup>2</sup>. Currently, it has no direct authority on the Dedicated Implementation Structure (DIS) or the Executive Agency, which are under the authority of the European Commission. The financial rules of FP7 are not suitable for support of excellence in research that the Scientific Council wants to promote; this issue is discussed also under "Efficiency". The management of the Executive Agency should come from outside the European Commission; the role of the Secretary General is unclear and needs further definition.

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<sup>2</sup> Article 5.1 of the Decision establishing the European Research Council

## **Efficiency**

EUROHORCs would like to congratulate the “DIS” for the successful management it ensured when faced with the massive number of projects submitted in the first calls.

However, there is a lack of administrative flexibility, resulting in a heavy administrative burden for both the “DIS” and the host institutions.

These difficulties stem from the fact that the “Ideas” programme has to follow the Rules for Participation and the Financial Rules of FP7. These rules are not appropriate for this programme and will remain a fundamental weakness if applied to the Executive Agency which will replace the “DIS”. This is why EUROHORCs will explicitly look into the advantages and the disadvantages of managing the programme through an Executive Agency or an independent legal entity.

## **Transparency**

The ERC needs to reinforce its communication strategy; the scientific community feels the Scientific Council gives insufficient information on ERC’s scientific strategy and its implementation, on the evaluation procedure and on the evaluators.

The institutional stakeholders feel there was a lack of information and consultation on the procedures for appointing the panel in charge of the mid-term review and those for the identification, appointment and renewal of the Scientific Council. These latter procedures must be clearly laid down in the ERC legal base, along commonly accepted lines.

## **Conclusions**

EUROHORCs strongly support the ERC and its initial achievements which have established benchmarks of scientific excellence in promoting “Frontier Research” in Europe.

EUROHORCs underline that the ERC can gain and maintain the trust of the scientific community and build its European and international credibility only by fully following the basic principles set in the legislative text creating the ERC.

EUROHORCs reiterate their commitment to contribute to the debate on the evolution of the ERC, having experienced directly, or through their constituencies (i.e. the national research communities) the successes and difficulties of the first two years of operation of ERC. In this context, they would be ready to testify at a hearing by the review panel.

In conclusion, EUROHORCs express their full support to the statement of the Rietschel report: *“The ERC must be supported by a strong political mandate to play a role in funding European frontier research”*.