



Preserve the European Research Council's legacy

A change in European Commission management styles under Horizon 2020 must not end the funding agency's focus on excellence, says Helga Nowotny.

Influential German sociologist Max Weber said that the 'routinization of charisma' is normal in organizations. It is fashionable these days to compare science with business, and Steve Jobs and Apple come to mind as examples: the company's image became based around the personal characteristics and accomplishments of its innovative, edgy and revolutionary leader, and so survived him.

I will soon step down as president of the European Research Council (ERC), and my successor will be announced next week. But when it comes to the succession plan of the ERC, the charisma comes not from a single person, but from the pioneering scientists who acted as the driving force to reshape the entire research landscape of Europe.

There is turnover, too, in the Scientific Council that steers the ERC strategy. By the end of next year, its last two founding members will have left. Although this is part of the normal renewal process, it must not lead to a loss of the ERC's institutional memory of its crucial founding years, including how it overcame many obstacles.

I am concerned for the future of the ERC — but first, some history. Every successful organization begins with a courageous decision, according to management consultant Peter Drucker. That applies to the ERC. Seven years ago, the European Union (EU) made a courageous decision to establish an agency to fund frontier research on the basis of a sole criterion: scientific excellence. It received a 'big bang' budget of €7.5 billion (US\$10.3 billion). Most unusually, setting the scientific strategy was entrusted to the autonomous Scientific Council of 22 members, whereas the implementation would be in the hands of a 'dedicated implementation structure', which is now the ERC Executive Agency.

The ERC has been a great success. Recognition of the fairness, transparency and credibility of its evaluation procedure has transformed it into the gold standard for Europe. This high reputation has unleashed unprecedented competition among host institutions for the prestige of ERC grants. This has probably contributed more than anything to energizing the European Research Area and increasing its attractiveness to researchers from outside Europe. Most importantly, it has boosted the careers of the younger researchers who now constitute almost two-thirds of the more than 4,000 grant recipients whom the ERC has funded so far.

As these numbers grow, so does the number of people involved in ERC evaluations, from 900 panel members in 2009–10 to almost 2,000 in 2012–13. But the scientific community should not think that ERC activities have become a safe, predictable routine.

Here is my concern. Neither the ERC nor the standards it has set for scientific excellence

should be taken for granted. At stake is the continuing sense that the ERC belongs to the scientific community, earned through scientists' continued commitment and dedication as panel members, remote reviewers, constructive critics and mentors. The founding generation's legacy is an evaluation procedure of the highest quality, and it must be maintained and safeguarded at all costs.

Under Horizon 2020, the next round of EU funding for research and innovation, the ERC will have a significantly increased budget of more than €13 billion. This is an explicit recognition by the European Commission of the pioneering part that the ERC is expected to play in the next seven years, injecting scientific excellence into other parts of Horizon 2020 and demonstrating the impact of frontier research.

This is good news. But the consequences of some of the changes under Horizon 2020 are less clear. The ERC's dual governance structure is both its unique strength and its greatest vulnerability. The strength is the power of its autonomous Scientific Council. The vulnerability is that implementation of the council's decisions by the ERC Executive Agency is subject to general EU rules and regulations, not all of them fit for the ERC.

After overcoming many initial difficulties, the Scientific Council has forged a trusted relationship with its Executive Agency and a highly professional staff. Under the new management modes of Horizon 2020, there will be a massive outsourcing of activities to executive agencies; the ERC Executive Agency will become one of many. I can see the pressure mounting for

administrators to comply with a 'one size fits all' model based on the common denominator of executive agencies and their underlying logic of greater efficiency through streamlining. New key performance indicators, such as impact measurements, are being set up, and some may be at odds with the ERC's mission of funding only excellence.

The European Commission will continue to oversee and control the executive agencies. The special nature of the ERC is enshrined in EU legislation. The Horizon 2020 big machinery will soon start working, but it must not be allowed to overrun the unique specificity of the ERC by subjecting it to rules that do not fit its objectives. The commission must guarantee that the ERC is not put into an administrative straitjacket.

The ERC sees itself as a learning, and hence experimental, institution. It has proven that a courageous decision such as that by those who established it can and does pay off. Continuous vigilance, monitoring and adjustments will be necessary to safeguard what has been accomplished. ■

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