



Europe needs a research leader who will lead

The next research commissioner for the European Union will need the drive and confidence to clear a daunting in-tray, argues Colin Macilwain.

In a few months, Europe will appoint a research commissioner whose €11-billion (US\$15-billion) annual budget will make him or her, at least in theory, the most influential figure in European science policy.

Nations are now scrambling to pick and send to Brussels one commissioner each, to provide a pool of 28 from which the research head and others will be plucked. Research commissioner is not the most prestigious appointment for some of these people. But it is a crucial one for Europe's researchers, many of whom are spending rather too much time grumpily pondering career prospects — their own, and others' — in the United States or Asia.

The right appointment could help to lift their morale. The wrong one could squander the promise of Horizon 2020, the €80-billion, 7-year research-and-innovation programme that the European Union (EU) instigated this year.

The longlist is far from complete, so it is too early to speculate on who will get the job. What is known is that one of their first tasks will be to get Horizon 2020 firmly back on the rails. Some elements of the programme, notably the European Research Council, are in reassuringly rude health. But there are already ominous murmurs among researchers that Horizon 2020 could fail to deliver on its promise to address 'grand challenges' such as ageing and climate change.

Horizon 2020 relies on an array of old 'instruments' with unsexy names, such as Joint Technology Initiatives, to tackle these challenges.

But it is not clear that the mix of instruments has the necessary cohesion to make a visible impact on the challenges. And many talented university researchers, who still live out their lives in disciplinary silos, seem to have baulked at applying for early Horizon 2020 calls that are phrased in terms of those broad, societal goals.

While addressing these problems, the commissioner will have to calm ongoing turmoil in the administration of the research directorate itself. Hundreds of staff members who deal with research proposals are being dispersed to agencies outside the commission. They are unlikely to go quietly. Such extensive reorganization tends — at least in the short term — to trigger turf wars and backbiting that lower morale and clog the system.

The default position of the staff involved, as with most civil servants, is to loftily declare that they expect little — and receive less — in the way of support or inspiration from their boss, the commissioner. But in real life, leadership does matter. Only a strong and visible commissioner will allow the directorate to operate effectively while these administrative changes take place.

The commissioner must also have long-term

vision. That sounds like a cliché, but it happens to be true. The EU's unique seven-year budget process means that the plans for after 2020 need to be developed on the new commissioner's watch.

For example, Horizon 2020 was built around three basic ideas — the grand challenges, more emphasis on innovation and a larger European Research Council — that were firmly in place years ago. That outline had taken shape before the financial crisis struck in 2008, hammering national budgets and leaving researchers in swathes of Europe with minimal funding or job prospects.

The crisis should have triggered a rethink on how research money and other funds could be used to shore up opportunities in regions of eastern and southern Europe where the research base is crumbling.

But despite some late window-dressing, Horizon 2020 doesn't really take this issue seriously.

To address this, the commission is undertaking a consultation on 'Science 2.0', the buzzword for its vision of how science should be done and organized. What is a peer-reviewed paper? Whose data is it based on? Who are its authors? As Europe's largest research funder, the commission needs to provide incentives that will encourage scientists to embrace, rather than reject, this portentous but hazily defined future.

With that in-tray, the commissioner needs to be the kind of individual who genuinely believes that he or she can make a difference — and will rise to the challenge of doing so.

Ministers and commissioners tend to claim to have such ambitions when they begin. But their

default mode is usually that of a passenger, carried along by officials and events. Sadly, the departing commissioner, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, falls squarely into this category.

It does not have to be that way. It is still possible for stout-hearted individuals such as Neelie Kroes, the current digital-agenda commissioner, to exert real influence.

The most recent research commissioner to leave a large footprint was, unfortunately, Édith Cresson, a former French prime minister, whose abuse of the position led to her 1999 resignation and subsequent conviction before the European Court of Justice in 2006. Every scientist subjected to the commission's hair-raising auditing process since then knows the true cost of Cresson's legacy.

Research and innovation is now the third-largest programme in the EU (after agriculture, and structural funds to aid poor regions). A real leader who knows the ropes politically, and has a clear agenda for European research from day one, could change the mood music for all of European research. ■

Colin Macilwain writes about science policy from Edinburgh, UK.
e-mail: cfmworldview@gmail.com

IT IS STILL
POSSIBLE FOR
**STOUT-
HEARTED**
INDIVIDUALS TO
EXERT REAL
INFLUENCE.

➔ NATURE.COM
Discuss this article
online at:
go.nature.com/yisjnt