

European Commission unveils long-awaited science advice plans

Team of expert researchers will bridge between politicians and wider science community.

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Carlos Moedas is head of research at the European Commission in Brussels.

European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker has announced plans to establish a new independent scientific advice system, based on a high-level group of seven researchers who will draw on expertise from around Europe.

At a press conference in Brussels on 13 May, Juncker said that the idea was to make use of scientific expertise in Europe through close relationships with national academies and other bodies. The seven internationally recognized experts, who could come from anywhere in the world, will sit within the commission's research directorate, supported by a 25-person strong secretariat, he said. The new system

would be up and running in the autumn.

"We've been awaiting a scheme for scientific advice and some of us have been nervous it took so long," says Paul Nurse, a Nobel-prizewinning cell biologist who is head of London's Royal Society and also the director of the Crick Institute, a biomedical research centre in London. "What we now see – admittedly without details – looks like something that could be constructive and useful for the future. A procedure has been put in place that will engage high quality scientists and is embedded within the commission more effectively than the previous advisory system, and it reaches out to academies around Europe," he says.

The announcement comes six months after the newly-appointed commission, under Juncker's leadership, [controversially decided to abolish the high-level position of Chief Scientific Advisor](#) that had been created by his predecessor José Manuel Barroso in 2012. Anne Glover, a biologist who was previously Scotland's chief scientific adviser, was the first and last person to hold the post.

Glover's role never stitched neatly into the complex organization of the commission, which already has its own range of internal and external scientific advisory structures, including its large Joint Research Centres. While the UK supported the idea of a single figurehead, others of the European Union's 28 member states, such as Germany and France, were uncomfortable with it.

Research commissioner Carlos Moedas said that he proposed the new system to Juncker after studying the range of other science advisory systems around the world and taking into account the particular needs and culture of the commission.

The panel members will be selected by a small search committee of three or four individuals, said Moedas. He compared the selection process to that involved in choosing the board members of the European Research Council, which funds basic research: "The only criterion will be research excellence," he said. Up to €6 million (US\$6.9 million) would be available to national academies to support collaborations with the commission, he added.

In practice, any commissioner wanting scientific advice will be able to approach the high-level group, which will seek input from academies and the wider scientific community as appropriate. Moedas said that it was his job to ensure that advice was actually sought

in all relevant areas, while the secretariat would take care of the day-to-day flow of information.

“It is a good thing that the new structure is finally decided,” comments science policy expert James Wilsdon, from the University of Sussex, UK. “They’ll need to make sure it is going to work once it is in place – it’ll be a great challenge to connect science advice to decision-making across the commission.”

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