

Starting well in Europe

Despite a reputation for impenetrable bureaucracy, the European Union has in place two relatively elegant funding mechanisms for the critical transitions of a scientist's career: for the PhD moving into postdoctoral research, and for outstanding researchers launching their first independent research programs.

There is no necessary correlation between ability in navigating bureaucratic paperwork and talent for bringing innovative research ideas to fruition. Recognizing this, two of the programs of the European Union's seventh framework for research funding (FP7) address the career needs of researchers rather well.

A call for €185 million of funding for early research training was announced in April with an August deadline (FP7-PEOPLE-ITN-2008). This call announces the continuation of the "Marie Curie Actions" that fund specialized research training in areas chosen by the researchers themselves and that are awarded through collaborative networks of institutions. Up to three years of support is thus available for researchers in the first four years after qualifying for a postgraduate research program, up to two years of support for more experienced researchers in the first five years of their career as well as other awards for scientists returning to Europe from overseas.

The helping hand at the next career hurdle is the wonderful new European Research Council (ERC), mandated to encourage basic research and to fund individual investigators competitively, judged by peer review on the basis of excellence. In 2007, ERC offered Starting Independent Researcher Grants of up to €2 million over five years for researchers seeking independence two to nine years from obtaining a first doctoral degree. Uptake was fierce and rapid. Over 9,000 proposals were submitted—37% from the life sciences—and of these, 8,794 were peer reviewed. Early this year, 201 projects were announced as

priority, to be funded from the published budget, with a further 229 ranked for funding, should money become available.

Recognizing the strategic value of Europe-wide competitive evaluation of research proposals in establishing independent research programs, national research funding agencies in France, Italy, Switzerland and Spain have stepped forward to take up the shortfall, offering the possibility of financial support for Starting Grant applications that met ERC criteria of excellence, but for which the money currently allotted by the EU proved insufficient to provide ERC funding.

We commend the ERC for the transparency and efficiency of its decision making and on the obvious excellence of the researchers shortlisted. With luck, the EU will be reassured that after selection for excellence alone, institutions in the six original EEC member states still represent about half of the selected proposals. Researchers in new member states should be encouraged to apply, as applicants from states joining the EU since 2004 make up just 5% of the total selected, from about 9% of all submissions. EU paymasters would do well to listen to the ERC and the scientists it represents, because they have estimated the real demand for critical research funding accurately and know how to make a difference.

The next call for ERC Starting Grants will be published in summer 2008, with a call deadline in autumn 2008. The journal particularly welcomes feedback from European researchers with suggestions on how to make the EU an even more encouraging place to do good science. ■