

## Too hesitant steps forward in European collaboration

**Researchers seeking to build projects that make the best of Europe's potential have no obvious place to turn. A new proposal should be actively encouraged by funding agencies, despite their strong reservations.**

Most people would think it self-evident that, reflecting the development of political and economic structures, there should be an organization that coordinates and possibly funds pan-European collaborative research projects. The European Commission already does so in many areas, but has set its face (and indeed is legally constrained) against the support of basic science for its own sake. The comparatively tiny European Science Foundation (ESF), among other functions, successfully coordinates research networks that are supported financially by Europe's national funding agencies — the same bodies that fund the ESF itself and which together control about 95% of Europe's research funds. The question that has only now reached the top of the European policy agenda is whether some of those funds should be funnelled towards collaboration in a more systematic and institutionalized fashion.

Two bodies that are dealing with this question are the ESF itself, for whom the idea represents an obvious opportunity, and an informal group that meets but twice a year: the heads of European research councils (Eurohorcs), for whom the obstacles to the idea loom large — possibly too large — while the more sceptical of them question the need for any new arrangements. Multilateral collaboration is abundant, after all. All too quickly, the sceptics say, any move forward will mushroom into their ultimate bogeyman conjured up to frighten overly Europhilic politicians: the European Research Council — a bureaucratic monster bound to erode national scientific accountability.

### Catalyst for action

There are clearly topics of research — for example, in basic environmental and geoscientific research, in the development of medium-sized facilities, in phase I clinical trials, in social sciences — where it would be beneficial to have an organization known by researchers and agencies alike as the first point of contact and, where enough pan-European interest is apparent, as the catalyst of multilateral action. Politically, the only way forward to that end is a stepwise development that gingerly but demonstrably explores ways of delivering such a benefit without unleashing a self-perpetuating and insufficiently accountable bureaucracy.

A timely if not entirely original proposal has recently provided a possible way forward and usefully stimulated discussion among the *cognoscenti* of European science policy. Reinder van Duinen, head of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), suggests that a body such as the ESF should coordinate research projects that, at the least, would bring together existing or nascent national projects in particular areas (see *Nature* 395, 208; 1998). In preliminary clinical trials or studies of genetic associations, for example, the benefits would flow from the harmonization of methodologies and the scale and diversity of the population samples studied. At the most, says van Duinen, the ESF might, in the exploratory phase, administer a pot of contributions from interested research councils for competitive bids from across Europe, subject to peer review, towards a particular scientific goal.

This latter suggestion is where the critical obstacles appear most distinctly. First, it seems unlikely that some research councils (France's CNRS and the UK research councils not least) could enter into such an arrangement without government permission, raising the unappetizing prospect of many negotiations over national accountability. Second, it could be seen as the birth of a vaunting new Eurobureaucracy, leading to the European Research Council. Third, it requires that the ESF (assuming that it would be undesirable to invent yet another new body) be trusted to do the job well, and in a manner that suits research councils and researchers.

This last point begs further critical questions. On paper the ESF is the natural organization for the job. Founded nearly 25 years ago, it has given excellent and welcomed advice to the European Commission on the troubled fifth Framework research programme, has acted as midwife to at least one international facility, and has helped European astronomers fight off some of the worst impacts of satellite-based mobile communications, while at least some of its research networks have been well endorsed by participants. But its leaders in recent years have failed to secure the confidence of its funders, ambiguously labelled "member organizations", that it has a vital role to play.

### Persuasiveness

The ESF is now under the relatively new leadership of its Spanish director-general, Enric Banda. Of more fundamental importance, the relationship of the ESF to its member organizations, the European research councils, and also to research communities themselves, are under active reconsideration. There is therefore an opportunity for the ESF to seize van Duinen's proposal as a way forward, but to do so in a way that does not undermine its current activities. This will be a test of the combined persuasiveness of Banda and the ESF's long-serving and influential president, Dai Rees. It requires above all a demonstration by them that, perhaps with the judicious appointment of a heavyweight and diplomatically skilled senior manager responsible for the project, the ESF can gain the trust of the research agencies that their own interests will not be compromised.

The final question begged is how researchers themselves express their opinions and requirements amid all of this, both now, in the initial phases of the proposal, and in any structure that might emerge. Euroscience, a fledgling grass-roots body inspired by the model of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), is being mentioned by some research council heads as potentially providing a vehicle. With luck, imagination and good judgement, Euroscience should play a useful role in Europe. But there is no more reason to wish to defer to it in the present context than there would be for the US National Institutes of Health to depend on the views of the AAAS.

Thus the bodies that most desire a streamlining and encouragement of European collaboration in basic science presently lack the required strength, while the group most capable of ensuring that something happens is only minimally enthusiastic. While that situation persists, scientists in Europe will remain inadequately served. □