

Science needs the commission, *Sturm und Drang* and all

Despite its burdensome traditions, the European Commission may be the best hope for funding Europe's basic research.

Blood was metaphorically spilled in a small room in Brussels last week, when a dozen research directors from Germany's Max Planck Society met with European Commission officials for a frank exchange of views and information.

At one point, the years of frustration with the commission's successive, and increasingly Byzantine, Framework research programmes bubbled over, briefly pushing a mood of seething courtesy into undisguised rage. One of the scientists spat out his view that money is distributed in the current, sixth Framework programme (FP6) according to the rules of "lottery and lobbying". Achilles Mitsos, director general of the research commission, responded angrily to these L-words, barking his refusal to respond to "this kind of allegation" in the tone of an angry parent driven beyond reason.

Many researchers have been at loggerheads with the commission throughout successive Framework programmes, which have all too often been painful to join. Not that they lacked vision. FP4 came with a grand vision of integrating basic and industrial researchers from rich and poor countries. The messianic vision of FP5 was to plunge the newly integrated community into complex socio-economic problems. And the underlying vision of FP6 is the European Research Area, stimulated by an emphasis on building fewer but larger and well-funded mega-collaborations with such names as Networks of Excellence or Integrated Projects.

The current Framework programme is taking the application procedures to new extremes of complexity and anxiety. With each four-year programme shifting massively in philosophy, scientists have had to learn new rules of play. They must fill in ever thicker dossiers of forms, now so complex that many prefer to pay consultants to do the job, and twist their brain around near-surreal New-speak to justify their research — be it muscle physiology or new materials — in terms of gender relevance, for example.

But many researchers apply nevertheless, because their financial need is greater than their mistrust of the system, and this is why many also put up with success rates that have often been unacceptably low. Mitsos says that over-subscription to Framework programmes is a sign of success. He is mistaken. It is a sign of the need for European-level funding for basic research which does not exist elsewhere.

Central funding

For researchers, the commission serves, understandably but also unfairly, as the whipping boy. It is the executive arm of the world's most complex political grouping, the European Union (EU), and as such is bound by rules set by its wilful political masters, the Council of Ministers and the directly elected European Parliament. Many of the research commission's bureaucrats are themselves scientists who have bent over backwards to shoehorn basic research into programmes, which, they are instructed from above, must directly address the societal or economic needs of the EU citizen. But however they try, they will never be able to reconcile satisfactorily the need for no-strings basic research with the EU's political and legal requirement to serve the citizen.

So we can welcome the commission's initiative, announced by Mitsos in that small room after the fireworks and the wound-licking, to launch a serious political discussion on a realistic mechanism of funding basic research at the European level — one that researchers have long been calling for (see page 487). Importantly, the concept that he outlined foresees funding of such research by the commission, which would for the first time distribute money on the basis of scientific excellence alone, as judged by a peer-review system run by the scientific community.

The target, everyone knows, is the creation of a European Research Council (ERC), although that phrase will be introduced formally only when the concept has political backing. Some want to see an ERC fed by money from the budgets of national research councils, fearing that money given by the commission could never really be free from bureaucracy. But the commission seems to be sensitive to the issue and confident that it can be done. Moreover, it is in any case not clear that national research councils would be legally able to switch parts of their own budget to an international pool.

Viable solution

The commission's plan has a chance of being put into operation by 2007 if politicians play ball, in time for FP7. Its enactment is contingent on the commission receiving the major increase in research budget that is foreseen in the next round of financing. If the money and political will converge to launch a commission-funded ERC, will Europe's basic researchers still need the Framework programmes as well? Yes, because despite the general frustrations, many of the programmes selected for funding in FP6 do in fact fit well with the criteria, are of the highest quality and, like the vaccine-development programmes, are so large and wide-ranging that it is hard to imagine them being funded by a different mechanism.

To the mentors of the initial ERC concept — notably the heads of the Scandinavian, Dutch and German research councils — the idea that their bold vision might end up in the clutches of EU bureaucracy is no doubt a cause for dismay. They should be glad, however, to have the commission on their side, rather than working against them, which would nip progress in the bud.

The new European Constitution, if finalized as expected before the end of the year, will give the commission more power to try new approaches in research policy, without the full consent of the member states. Mitsos has made it clear that the commission is willing to grasp the opportunity. He has also clearly indicated that the winner will be basic research.

This does not necessarily mean that the commission has usurped the idea of an ERC, or that it intends to superimpose its bureaucratic structures on it. The chances are still good that an ERC will become a body that is legally and financially accountable to the commission but technically, scientifically and administratively autonomous. Europe's scientific leaders should be politically wise enough not to dismiss prematurely a compromise that could turn into a viable solution. ■