

Growing pains

The fledgling European Research Council is struggling against the constraints imposed by the European Commission. It needs to be completely independent.

Two years after its inception, the European Research Council (ERC) seems to be doing well. Set up by its parent body, the European Commission, as the first-ever pan-European agency for funding basic science solely in terms of excellence, it has now run two full rounds of grants and earmarked some 600 projects for funding. But this apparent success masks some troubling issues. The council is facing a number of legal and administrative constraints grounded in the culture of the commission itself.

The issues can be traced back to the ERC's formative years when, after much passionate debate, it was agreed that the council's administration would be handled by an executive agency. This body is legally separate from the European Commission, but is still under its control and bound by its rules and regulations.

This made it possible for the ERC to be born in a speedy and relatively pain-free manner. But it put the agency in danger of being suffocated by the commission's infamous bureaucracy, and by the multitudinous checks and balances that constrain how commission money can be spent. This red tape reflects the culture of mistrust that has haunted the commission since fraud allegations forced commission president Jacques Santer and all his fellow commissioners to resign in 1999, and has often been cited as deterring researchers from taking part in the commission's Framework research programmes.

As was feared, bureaucracy now seems to be stifling the ERC's mission (see page 440). A prime example is that, legally speaking, ERC grant recipients are contractors to the commission — which means they have to fill out onerous time sheets detailing their activities throughout their working day.

The commission should cut through this red tape by embracing the alternative favoured by many academics. It should make the ERC legally independent. Article 171 of the treaty that governs the

European Union specifically allows for the creation of such bodies. An independent ERC would still have to account for the proper use of European Union funds to both the European Parliament and the member states. But it would have the freedom to operate and govern itself in the way it thought best for a body funding basic research.

The key drawback of such autonomy, according to sceptics within the commission and elsewhere, is that it might make the agency more vulnerable to pressure from member states seeking a share of the ERC funds for researchers in their own borders. Such influence would undermine the ERC's mandate of awarding grants solely on the basis of scientific excellence.

These fears are unfounded. Article 171 would allow the ERC to set up any structure it deems appropriate to fulfil its function, and it would be under no obligation to put member-state representatives on its decision-making boards. It is true that member states and the European Parliament would have to vote to agree to such an autonomous structure, and they would also have a vote on the ERC's budget — but this is no different from the ERC's current situation with its executive agency.

When the commission set up the ERC, it deferred until 2010 a decision on whether the council should remain in its current form, or should be restructured once it was established. That decision will be based on an independent review of how the ERC is functioning, which is due to be published this week. This assessment must not be allowed to be buried. The commission now has the chance to make the changes required to ensure that the ERC has a strong future and is a true servant of the scientific community. ■

"Bureaucracy now seems to be stifling the European Research Council's mission."

Beyond the pristine

Earth's disturbed ecosystems have much more to offer than many would give them credit for.

Take a look out of the nearest window. Chances are that the view will show a man-made landscape — a residential neighbourhood, a field of wheat, an overgrazed hillside or a weedy forest full of invasive species. An estimated 77% of Earth's ice-free land has now been substantially altered by human activities, and that proportion is likely to rise.

Scientists and conservationists would do well to pay more attention to the landscape outside the window. At the moment, they tend to concentrate on the remote fraction of Earth that looks more or less

like it did before humans swarmed the globe, and on the protection of those places. And they have good reason to do so: such relatively pristine sites not only harbour much of Earth's biodiversity, they also offer a unique opportunity to learn how nature works in isolation from *Homo sapiens*.

Nonetheless, the majority of Earth that is not pristine provides critical support for human life, in the form of agriculture, development and the 'ecosystem services' that sequester carbon, filter water, build soil, shore up hillsides — and it even creates habitats to shelter threatened species.

About half of that 77% of Earth's surface is in direct use by humans for agriculture and urban development. The other half is marked by past human influences — fragmented forests filled with species from other continents, forest plantations, abandoned grazing lands and so on. Some ecologists have begun to classify portions of the latter half