

POLICY

Scientists promised 'one voice' in European policy

ScienceEurope hopes to shift balance of power away from Brussels and towards researchers.

BY NATASHA GILBERT

Scientists often struggle to get their opinions heard above the din of voices competing to influence policy and research-funding decisions in the European Union. A new Brussels-based group, ScienceEurope, is now positioning itself as the scientists' champion in the fight to sway decision-makers. "We will become the single voice for science in Europe," says Paul Boyle, a member of the pilot board of the organization, which launches next month.

"If we speak in one voice it will be easier to see if our recommendations have influenced policy," adds Boyle, who is chief executive of Britain's Economic and Social Research Council in Swindon.

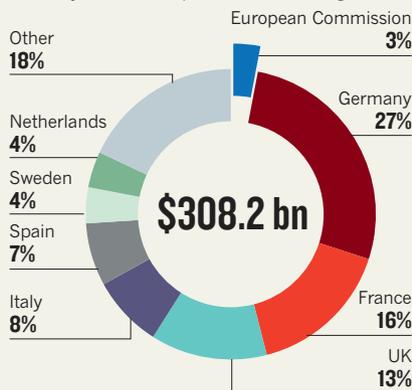
ScienceEurope unites two science advocacy groups: the European Science Foundation (ESF) based in Strasbourg, France, and the European Heads of Research Councils (EUROHORCs) based in Berne. The two groups have common members, including Europe's leading national research and funding organizations, such as the Helmholtz Association of German Research Centres, headquartered in Berlin, and Britain's Medical Research Council in London. They also share similar goals and have previously worked together on policy development. Earlier this year they voted to join forces.

Once ScienceEurope holds its founding assembly in Berlin on 21 October, EUROHORCs will cease to exist. The ESF may continue as a separate body but will probably wind down its activities over the next few years.

Marja Makarow, a molecular biologist at the University of Helsinki and chief executive of the ESF, says that the merger was born out of a need for an organization that would have greater influence in Brussels and would be "flexible

WHO FUNDS EUROPE'S SCIENCE?

Despite having a major influence on research agendas, the European Commission (EC) allocates relatively little of Europe's science funding.



enough to respond quickly to emerging issues", features that Makarow feels neither the ESF nor EUROHORCs has. Being located outside Brussels and holding infrequent meetings have proved disadvantageous to both organizations. And, unlike ScienceEurope, the ESF had no mandate to speak on behalf of its members.

ScienceEurope's pilot board will flesh out the organization's structure and strategy over the coming months. Boyle says that they plan to set up committees covering all research disciplines to guide the organization's activities. They also hope to hold large annual meetings to bring together the plethora of other European and international science and university groups to discuss strategies and debate priorities.

One of ScienceEurope's key goals is to help to build the European Research Area (ERA), a long-cherished ideal within the European Union that would allow researchers to move

freely across borders, taking their funding with them. ScienceEurope's membership base gives it strong links with research policy-makers at national levels, which could help it tackle the thornier problems of the ERA, such as transferring scientists' pensions from one country to another.

Makarow also hopes that ScienceEurope can shift the balance of power in science policy-making away from the European Commission and back towards scientists in member states. She points out that the European Commission manages a tiny fraction of the funds spent annually across Europe (see graph), yet leads the debate on the direction of science policy. "The balance is not right," she says.

Ernst Rietschel, former president of the Leibniz Association of German research institutes, agrees that European scientists need better-coordinated representation. But he and others are concerned that ScienceEurope will not be influential enough because, unlike the ESF, it will not disburse research funding. To have clout you "need money", he observes.

Jean-Pierre Henriët, a geologist and emeritus professor at the University of Ghent in Belgium, is angry that the merger will result in the ESF ending its funding of collaborative research projects. Its annual budget previously provided more than €100 million (US\$144 million), collected from member states.

The ESF grants provide "essential funding" for young scientists, who develop contacts and learn networking and leadership skills in collaborative projects, he says, and losing the grants will leave a "major gap" in the research-funding landscape.

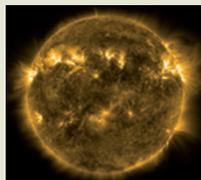
"I understand their concerns," says Makarow, "and hope that other instruments that provide funding at a European level will be developed to fill the gap". ■

SOURCE: OECD/EU

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