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## A chance to drive forward Europe's science

The new head of the European Research Council will have more power and focus than former presidents, says Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker.

**W**ANTED: An ambitious and skilled science administrator to oversee a continent-wide research programme with considerable impact and a steadily increasing budget. Diplomatic skills essential. Must be able to travel.

One of the most appealing jobs in global science is now available.

The European Research Council (ERC) is looking for a new president, and the European Commission, which guarantees the autonomy and integrity of the council, has set up an independent search committee to find just the right person.

What makes the job so attractive? The answer is not too difficult. The ERC is a resounding success. Since its launch more than six years ago, it has supported more than 3,000 researchers. It is the jewel in the crown of European Union (EU) research.

A decade ago, things were quite different. European scientists, many of whom hailed from countries that did not have national funding agencies, were fighting for a Europe-wide agency that could promote excellence in basic research, and could match what they saw in the United States.

I was involved in that effort, which was universally seen as a good idea, but difficult to get going. Early, cautious efforts aimed to create an 'agency of the agencies'. Only when the European Commission got involved did the concept begin to float.

Because the European Commission will remain in the financial driving seat for the coming years, the most challenging part of the new job will be to work with the body. Commission-bashing is easy and fashionable, but it is usually superficial. The complexity of the commission's operations is daunting — to understand and accept that will require enormous patience, knowledge and communication skills.

Change is never rapid, and an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary type of personality may therefore be required. The commission and its representatives hold the ERC in high esteem, and they have made an impressive effort to reduce its administrative burdens. Nevertheless, there remains some way to go.

The first two presidents of the ERC — Fotis Kafatos and Helga Nowotny — did an excellent job. And thanks to the ingenuity of the Scientific Council — the ERC's strategy and decision-making body — and the strong commitment of the administrative staff, the ERC works well.

This is not to say that the third president will be able to climb into a neatly made-up bed. To raise its attractiveness, the job has been redesigned to be more powerful and focused than for the former presidents.

The restructuring follows the 2011 recommendation of a task force that investigated the ERC's governance. The positions of president of the Scientific Council and of secretary general have been fused to create a President *sui generis*,

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based in Brussels and thus able to deal directly on site with the various day-to-day tussles of the job.

Still, president number three will face several challenges. One is the extremely uneven distribution of returns on investment to the various member states and associated countries. Strict adherence to the council's core principle of funding excellence alone has highlighted extreme differences in scientific competence over the European continent. More than 98% of the ERC's grants are awarded to scientists in the old EU-15, with mere crumbs thrown to newer member countries. Although many of these countries have fine academic traditions, their supporting infrastructures tended to be neglected during the time of the iron curtain, and may take a generation or two to restore. The ERC cannot remedy this deficiency alone, but it could have an efficient advisory role.

The ERC, like much of science, still has a gender problem. For example, 29% of applicants for a starting grant and 15% of applicants for advanced grants are women, yet the success rates for female scientists are consistently at least 2% lower than for men. The ERC is, of course, aware of this, and of the unconscious bias that may still be affecting peer review. The ERC must not only remain sensitive to the issue, but also find a more proactive way to tackle it.

A particularly interesting problem is the evolution of the relationship between the ERC and the national funding councils. Some in Europe think that the national councils should dissolve and only the ERC survive. But mono-cultures are never ideal and can even be detrimental.

It would be in the best interest of both the ERC and the national research councils to develop plans for continued coexistence. A first step could be to give applicants from new member states access to the financial resources of other ERC nations. Bulgarian or Estonian scientists should be able to win money from the, say, German, Dutch or UK research councils, even if working in their home countries. Why should the rich countries participate? Because it would broaden the base of their own competitions and because it could rapidly improve the opportunities for scientists in the new member states to raise ERC grants, thereby reducing the unhealthy divide between East and West.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the financial outlook for the ERC is positive. Its budget for 2014–20 will rise significantly. Not even our colleagues in the United States can say that.

The ERC needs a president with a truly European mindset, and one who believes that it is important to build a broader base for frontier research. I hope our best and brightest will take note. ■

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