High maintenance

The next president of the European Research Council will face the dual challenge of preserving the agency's reputation for excellence while trying to address funding inequalities.

It is an open secret that French mathematician Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, director of the Institute for Advanced Scientific Studies in Paris, heads the shortlist of candidates for the next president of the European Research Council (ERC).

His expertise in differential geometry might not directly help him to handle the delicate, differential politics that are rife in the European Union (EU), and the consequent tensions between richer western and poorer eastern member states that are the most potent threat to the ERC. But his reputation as a strong-minded defender of the value of research excellence surely will. Such strength is needed to maintain the ERC's happy status quo.

The ERC is a resounding success story. Founded just six years ago to fund highly competitive basic research, it launched itself with an appropriately rigorous — some might say remorseless — peer-review system to fund the best scientists through its two main grant streams. Its reputation for scientific excellence was quickly established, with universities using the number of their ERC grant recipients as a measure of their own status. Winning an ERC grant is an occasion for champagne, for both the honour and the cash — grants are worth up to €3.5 million (US$4.8 million). Moreover, the ERC is likely to enjoy a significant hike in budget in the European Commission's seven-year Horizon 2020 research-funding programme, which launches in January.

The clouds that threaten this sunny landscape are distant. But they are there, and the challenge will be to keep them at bay. The problem of the gap between rich and poor countries will not disappear any time soon. And, not unexpectedly, such inequality is writ large in ERC statistics. At one extreme, almost half of all ERC grants are awarded to scientists in just three countries: the United Kingdom, Germany and France. At the other, barely 2% are awarded in the former communist countries that joined the EU after 2004.

When politicians in eastern Europe look at these statistics, they are rightly indignant — but they are wrong to ask the ERC to change. They often argue inappropriately for reduced investment in the elite research agency, or for a special ERC funding stream to favour their own disadvantaged countries. The appropriate response would be to fix the problems at home that make their scientists relatively uncompetitive. The countries need to make good use of generous EU structural funds to improve their national research infrastructure. And they need to be more wholehearted in following the EU spirit, laid out in various treaties and agreements, of investing more in national science and allocating most research money competitively. Once their scientists are better placed to compete for ERC grants, the differential will slowly be reduced. But politics is notoriously impatient, and accusations of political discrimination can be powerful.

The commission is unlikely to reveal the new president's identity formally until Horizon 2020 — currently stalled in tense negotiations about the overall EU budget — is signed off towards the end of the year. The ERC is independent, but needs a strong leader to keep it out of the sphere of political influence. That is because it is funded by the European Commission, the policies of which are dictated by its political masters, the European Parliament and the European Council. The more beloved and successful the ERC becomes — as indicated by the likely rise in its budget from €7.5 billion now to nearly €12 billion next year, or around 17% of the proposed total Horizon 2020 budget — the more politicians will squabble over who should benefit from its grants.

The ERC is somewhat sheltered from this squabbling because the current leaders of the commission's directorate-general for research and innovation are strong proponents of the ERC. But the leadership will be renewed next October, and the successors might not be so devoted. In any case, the shelter itself can be a double-edged sword. If not kept in check, the commission's byzantine accountability rules would throttle scientists with red tape. The level of detail required for reporting how ERC grant recipients have spent their money is already much too high. The new ERC president will have to ensure that this does not worsen.

> *"The ERC needs a strong leader to keep it out of the sphere of political influence."*

The president will also have to maintain attention on the ERC gender gap. According to the latest statistics, only 25% of its grant applicants are women, and their overall success rate is just 8%, compared with 11% for men. The ERC takes many soft measures to try to improve this, mostly through information campaigns, and this needs to continue. And although the ERC budget has improved gratifyingly, with success rates for grant applicants hovering around 10%, it is still much too low for its mission. The president will have to lobby for a level of funding that allows this success rate to double. That, unlike his or her official identity, is no secret at all. ∎

End harassment

Sexual harassment is a stain on science — and we must all take a stand against it.

The past week has seen an outpouring of online comment on the subject of sexual harassment in science and its satellite careers such as science journalism and communication. It was prompted by allegations against a leading figure in science blogging, Bora Zivkovic, who has since resigned as blogs editor with *Scientific American* (which is published by Nature Publishing Group).

Much of the comment has been from women, a distressingly large number of whom have described their own experiences of misogyny and prejudice in the workplace. One lesson to be drawn