Ten years into its existence, the European Research Council (ERC) has undoubtedly become a European success story. Its mission is “excellent science,” and its achievements in funding fundamental research are widely admired. Today, more than ever, European science and research must be ready to fully exploit the creative ecosystem that the ERC has helped to bring about. What does this mean for the ERC?

Over the past decade, through international competition, grants amounting to over €12 billion have been awarded to some 7000 researchers in Europe. Two-thirds of these awards go to younger scientists with 2 to 12 years of experience after receiving their Ph.D. Their careers have received a substantial boost, and their research teams are among the most international in the world. Scientific colleagues elsewhere envy the ERC’s mode of funding, which is centered on the principal investigator, without thematic priorities, and is open to any field of study, including social sciences and humanities. It has set the gold standard for fundamental research and has exerted considerable influence in raising standards everywhere in Europe.

But the exclusive focus on excellence has also evoked criticisms. As “excellence attracts excellence,” a disproportionate number of awards goes to the top universities in Europe located in a few countries, with the United Kingdom in pole position and Germany and France trailing behind. This is similar for Switzerland and Israel, the most successful among smaller countries. Excellent science is not about equal distribution, but despite the politically sensitive skewness, excellence must prevail.

What does the future hold? Budget negotiations for the European Commission’s (EC) next Framework Programme after 2020 have already started. Two recent developments are likely to affect ERC funding. Pressured by the new U.S. administration to assume a greater share in defense spending, the EC is already shifting toward supporting defense research. Then there is the U.K. exit from the European Union. Because the U.K. consistently ranks number one in cashing ERC grants (a total of €2.6 billion), an argument can be made to reduce funding accordingly, once the U.K. is no longer eligible. This neglects the high proportion of non-U.K. nationals who are ERC grantees. Among the very best and brightest, their fate is yet undecided.

Future administrative arrangements are another issue. The ERC is run by an Executive Agency (EA) in close working relationship with the ERC Scientific Council. When I stepped down as ERC president at the end of 2013, it was clear that the EA would be pushed to fall into line with other executive agencies in using tools and processes that were not always tailored to the ERC’s specific needs. This tendency has become stronger. For example, the ERC’s Web-based evaluation tools, much appreciated by its reviewers, were abandoned in favor of common tools, neglecting ERC’s specificities.

“The ERC must keep the frontier spirit alive...”

The ERC has been a unique and bold experiment to put the scientific community in charge. It must safeguard this position. Evaluation panels are formed and overseen by the Scientific Council, requiring time and dedicated effort. An unusual amount of ingenuity and foresight are needed to resist the “routinization of charisma” that can befall any organization, and to steer the course in the choppy waters ahead without losing a sense of direction.

Overcoming these challenges requires that the future of the ERC’s mission remain very focused. “Excellent science” is its hallmark, but use of this description has become inflationary. True to its mission to fund “frontier research,” the ERC must continue with a radical openness for the often unforeseeable opportunities that risky, exploratory science presents. It must keep the frontier spirit alive by creating conditions for younger researchers that spur them to boldly move ahead. Let science take the lead as we head into an uncertain decade that looks to be anything but “business as usual.”

—Helga Nowotny

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Editor's Summary

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