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European Young Investigators

SCIENCE IS INTERNATIONAL, BUT ITS FUNDING AND ADMINISTRATION ARE USUALLY A matter for governments of nation states. In Europe, this balkanization leads to problems; perhaps the worst is finding peer reviewers when, in a small country, applicants for support may have few peers. Of course, the definition of “peer” is not always clear, and it can be difficult to identify real experts in a field unless one is in it. That creates a problem, because supporting anything less than superior research wastes taxpayers’ money. In a small country, identifying quality depends on the fair and accurate opinions of foreign experts.

Having dealt successfully with this problem, a Europe-wide collaboration to fund basic research through a program called the European Young Investigators [(EURYI); www.esf.org/activities/euryi.html] has sent four cohorts of outstanding young European scientists into their posts with substantial research support since 2004. For better or worse, that program, which supported research ranging from theoretical physics to sociology, made its final appointments this year. The good news is that almost 100 investigators got grants of up to 250,000 euros per year for 5 years with no strings attached. An important question now is whether the European Research Council (ERC) will manage a similar program (Young Investigator Programme) with the same attention to the freedom and independence of young investigators that became a hallmark of EURYI.

The EURYI scheme was hatched by a roster of research councils from all over Europe, encouraged and administered by the European Science Foundation. Heads of the research councils wanted to promote European, rather than national, science and were concerned about career structures in the European Research Area. EURYI arrived when the Framework Programmes of the European Union (EU) were already in place, but the latter were not intended to support basic research. Rather, the EU awards are contracts, not grants, with milestones and deliverables that are more appropriate to engineering projects than to the foggy uncertainties of basic research. And European scientists have long complained about the application paperwork required for EU support. Really, the only mystery is why it took so long to set up a simple grant scheme such as EURYI to support young scientists.

A successful EURYI awardee had typically made an important discovery as a graduate student, made another as a postdoctoral fellow abroad, often in the United States, and then returned to Europe to set up a thriving laboratory. I chaired the Life Sciences and Medical Sciences selection process during EURYI’s 4 years and was very heartened by what I saw: administrators, panelists, candidates, and their institutions all enthusiastically supporting the program’s mission and structure (rigorous review by national and international panels), no matter where they came from.

EURYI’s success was quickly evident from the growth of the award’s prestige, the increase in the mutual trust of the participating organizations, and the scientific contributions of the EURYI scholars. Countries entered and left the program, some disappointed by their lack of success, but it was important—and a surprise—that there was no “juste retour” in the EURYI scheme. A nation could submit candidates for consideration in proportion to its financial contribution, but there was no guarantee that any of them would be successful.

What of the future? EURYI has ended because the ERC is now set up with similar aims and a larger budget. The 19 countries of EURYI are enlarged to the 27 of the EU. The 2000 applicants over 4 years of EURYI increased to 9000 in the first year of the ERC. That’s a good sign. Administering these schemes is a lot of work, but well worth it. We must hope that the ERC’s new program builds on the firm foundations of trust, fairness, consistency, and continuity that helped EURYI successfully transcend national boundaries. The ERC must allow young scientists in Europe the responsibility and freedom for independent discoveries and rightful credit. Giving young scientists independence is (alas) still not universal throughout Europe. The EURYI awards were, as my friend said, “In comparison to the regular EU grants, something that scientists really like.” Is that so terrible?

– Tim Hunt

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