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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL AND THE EUROPEAN  
PARLIAMENT**

**on the European Research Council's operations and realisation of the objectives set out  
in the Specific Programme "Ideas" in 2011**

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND LEGAL BASE

The European Research Council (ERC), established by Commission Decision 2007/134/EC<sup>1</sup>, has as its essential task the implementation of the Specific Programme "Ideas", with an overall budget of €7.51 billion.

The ERC consists of an independent Scientific Council supported by a dedicated implementation structure, which took the form of the ERC Executive Agency (ERCEA)<sup>2</sup> created under the general regime of executive agencies. Responsibility for implementing the "Ideas" programme and supporting the Scientific Council was delegated to the Agency by the Commission in 2008 and autonomy was granted to the Agency in July 2009.

In conformity with Article 4.4 and Annex I of the Council Decision on the Specific Programme "Ideas", this Annual Report of the Commission, drawn up in co-operation with the ERC Scientific Council and the ERC Executive Agency, presents the Commission's assessment of the ERC's operations and the achievement of its objectives in 2011. This report is complemented by a report from the Scientific Council on the scientific implementation and achievements of the programme during the year 2011<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. STRATEGY MATTERS

The Scientific Council is responsible for setting the ERC's scientific strategy, including establishing the ERC's most important strategy document, the annual "Ideas" Work Programme.

### 2.1. Funding schemes

Two grant schemes form the core of the 'Ideas' Work Programme:

*Starting Grants*, supporting researchers at the early stage of their careers, with the aim of providing working conditions that enable them to become independent research leaders.

*Advanced Grants*, designed to support outstanding and established research leaders by providing resources necessary to enable them to continue the work of their teams, seeking new breakthroughs in their line of research.

In order to strengthen the ERC's role in the innovation chain from frontier research to socio-economic benefits, the Scientific Council developed and launched in 2011 a new granting opportunity – the *Proof of Concept* – which is offered to ERC grant holders to establish the innovation potential of ideas arising from their ERC-funded projects. The scheme aims to cover a funding gap in the earliest stage of an innovation.

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<sup>1</sup> OJ L 57, 24.02.2007, p.14.

<sup>2</sup> 2008/37/EC: Commission Decision of 14 December 2007 setting up the European Research Council Executive Agency for the management of the specific Community programme Ideas in the field of frontier research in application of Council Regulation (EC) No 58/2003 (OJ L9, 12.01.2008, p.15).

<sup>3</sup> [http://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/erc\\_annual\\_report\\_2011.pdf](http://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/erc_annual_report_2011.pdf)

## **2.2. 2011 Work Programme for the Specific Programme "Ideas"**

The 2011 Work Programme for the Specific Programme "Ideas" was established by the Scientific Council on 14 April 2010 and subsequently adopted by the Commission on 19 July 2010<sup>4</sup>. The Work Programme was revised to include the new granting opportunity, the Proof of Concept. The revised version, established by the Scientific Council on 29 November 2010, was adopted by the Commission on 24 March 2011<sup>5</sup>.

Apart from the introduction of the Proof of Concept Grants, few adjustments were made in the scientific strategy: The eligibility window for the Starting Grant was further expanded; it now stands from 2 - 12 years from PhD award (2 - 7 for "starters" and 7-12 for "consolidators"). The restriction on reapplication was also relaxed; applicants can now reapply to the following call if their proposal was evaluated as above the quality threshold. The interdisciplinary domain has been renamed as the "fourth domain" with a 10% indicative budget.

## **2.3. Peer review methodology**

The ERC employs a structure of high-level peer review panels whose members are selected by the Scientific Council and include scientists, engineers and scholars from both within the EU and beyond. These panels cover all research disciplines and are organised in a framework of three main research domains: Physical Sciences and Engineering, Life Sciences, and Social Sciences and Humanities. Consistent with previous calls, the number of panels was 25 for both Starting and Advanced Grant schemes. Proof of Concept proposals were evaluated by a specific set of peer reviewers working remotely.

## **3. PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION**

In the implementation of the Programme in 2011, commitment credits of €1.3 billion (global commitment) and payments of €725 million were fully executed, representing 100% of the operational credits of the Ideas Specific Programme for 2011. Around 2.2% of the operational budget was spent on administration.

### **3.1. Grants**

Since the 2008 Work Programme, ERC calls involve a one-stage application process, where applicants are required to submit their full proposal, and a two-step evaluation.

Grants are offered to the best proposals depending on the budget available. The offer is made on the basis of the proposal itself and the funding recommended by the peer review evaluation.

#### *3.1.1. ERC Starting Grants*

The 2011 ERC Starting Grant call was published in July 2010 with an indicative budget of €661 million. In total 4080 proposals were received distributed by domain as follows: 1690 proposals in Physical Sciences and Engineering, 1440 in Life Sciences and 950 in Social Sciences and Humanities. A total of 485 proposals were selected for funding with a total of

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<sup>4</sup> C(2010)4898 of 19.07.10, not published

<sup>5</sup> C(2011)1848 of 24.03.11, not published

more than € 670 million awarded and an overall average awarded grant of around €1.4 million.

The 2012 Starting Grant call was published in July 2011 with an indicative budget of €730 million. A total of 4741 proposals were submitted in response: 2058 for Physical Sciences and Engineering, 1653 for Life Sciences and 1030 for Social Sciences and Humanities, representing respectively 43%, 35% and 22%, a split similar to the 2011 Starting Grant call, and the 2010 Starting Grant call.

### *3.1.2. ERC Advanced Grants*

The 2011 ERC Advanced Grant call was published in November 2010 with an indicative budget of €661 million. A total of 2284 proposals were received distributed by domain as follows: 917 proposals in Physical Sciences and Engineering (40%), 789 (35%) in Life Sciences and 578 in Social Sciences and Humanities (25%). The evaluation process resulted in a total of 294 proposals retained for funding with a total of about €700 million awarded and an overall average awarded grant of around €2.4 million.

The 2012 ERC Advanced Grant call was published in November 2011 with deadlines between February and April 2012 and an indicative budget of €680 million.

### *3.1.3. ERC Proof of Concept*

The first Proof of Concept call was published in March 2011 with an indicative budget of €10 million, approximately half of which for each of the two evaluation rounds following the two deadlines for submission set in June and in November 2011 respectively. Only researchers already holding an ERC Starting or Advanced Grant were eligible to apply for Proof of Concept funding. A total of 78 proposals were received at the first deadline and 73 of them were considered eligible for evaluation, with the following distribution per domain of the original ERC grant held by the applicant: 58% in Physical Sciences and Engineering, 34% in Life Sciences and 8% in Social Sciences and Humanities. The evaluation resulted in 30 proposals retained for funding.

At the second deadline, a total of 73 proposals were received and 67 of them were considered eligible for evaluation, with the following distribution per domain of the original ERC grant held by the applicant: 61% in Physical Sciences and Engineering, 34% in Life Sciences and 5% in Social Sciences and Humanities.

## **3.2. Programme Committee**

The Programme Committee of the Specific Programme "Ideas" serves, in addition to its formal duties, as an important communication network between the Member States and FP7 Associated Countries, the Scientific Council, the ERC Secretary General and the Commission. In 2011 meetings of this committee were held on 5 April and 24 October.

## **3.3. Ethical review**

Overall, in 2011 the ethical Review involved 55 external experts and covered 100% of proposals, out of which only 3 were flagged as dealing with Human Embryonic Stem Cells. These proposals will be transferred to the Commission for the finalisation of the process.

### **3.4. Redress**

In 2011, 234 requests for redress were received, representing 3.6% of the proposals submitted, a significant decrease compared to 4.6% in 2010. The two successful redress requests originated in errors on an individual assessment in the first step of the evaluation process. In both cases a complete re-evaluation took place, which concluded that both proposals should have been shortlisted for funding; as a consequence, the two proposals were selected for granting.

### **3.5. Communication**

During the course of 2011 the ERC intensified its awareness raising activities on funding opportunities, both in Europe and beyond, ensuring its presence and involvement in major international research conferences and exhibitions, as well as career fairs and workshops, while the visibility of ERC's funded projects was raised among the general public and the media.

**In Europe**, the ERC took part in the annual meetings of the European Molecular Biology Organisation in Vienna and of the European Sociological Association in Geneva, the Congress of the Federation of European Biochemical Societies in Torino, Nature Jobs Career Fair in London, the meeting of the European Universities Public Relations and Information Officers in Prague, the Falling Walls Conference in Berlin, as well as the EU Innovation Convention held in Brussels.

Special efforts were deployed in countries with low participation in ERC schemes. In June, at the occasion of the Hungarian Presidency of the European Union, the ERC organised in Budapest, jointly with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, a major conference on "Promoting Excellence in Research in Europe". The spotlight was on top researchers who had been successful in obtaining highly competitive ERC grants. A selection of ERC grant holders gave their testimonials, including 2010 Nobel Prize winner Konstantin Novoselov. In Riga (Latvia), a public presentation on the ERC was organised in cooperation with the national Academy of Sciences. In Poland, a series of awareness raising workshops were organised by the Polish National and Regional Contact Points.

On 25 May 2011, the ERC was invited for an exchange of views with the European Parliament's Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE). An exchange of views took place also at the Competitiveness Council of 30 September 2011 with the Commissioner for research, innovation and science and the ERC President.

**Outside Europe**, the ERC has again been present in a few priority countries, namely the US (MIT-European Career, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience, American Association for Cancer Research, Bio International Conference, American Geophysical Union Meeting), China (visit to research organisations and universities in Beijing), India (Indian Science Congress in Chennai and participation in an EU campaign organised by the EU Delegation throughout the country) and Brazil (Sao Paulo and Brasilia), on the occasion of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Research Foundation Agency of Brazil.

Scientific Council members and Executive Agency staff have contributed to many of these outreach activities and have attended other scientific congresses held in the EU and other parts of the world (such as the Annual Meeting of the American Society for Cell Biology in

Denver, US, the American Anthropological Association Annual Conference in Montréal and the Material Research Society Fall meeting in Warsaw).

The ERC caught the attention of the media both in Europe and worldwide throughout the year, both as an organisation and through its funded projects and its grant holders. Press activities resulted in a good number of articles in both the scientific and more general press (over 1900 mentions) and in many press releases and updates disseminated to the media. Numerous interviews with the ERC President, Secretary General or Scientific Council members have been published, also in major daily newspapers. Three "Special Features" were published to follow the news on the occasion of Alzheimer's day, the Breast Cancer Awareness Month and the UN Climate Change Conference in Durban.

The National Contact Points (NCPs), based all over Europe and serving as information multipliers to potential applicants, were continuously kept informed of the ERC developments and of its calls.

Finally, a completely new website was launched in September, with a new look-and-feel, a new layout, clearer and more user-friendly navigation, added functionalities and with a more dynamic approach. A quarterly electronic newsletter called "ideas" was first published in March, to offer more in-depth information and presentations of ERC achievements, projects, grantees and partners.

### **3.6. Monitoring, Assessment and Evaluation (MAE) of the Specific Programme "Ideas"**

An evaluation of the ERC main results was prepared in conjunction with the ex-ante impact assessment of the Commission's proposal on Horizon 2020, the next Framework Programme for Research and Innovation<sup>6</sup>. Findings from this evaluation include the following:

- By the end of 2011 more than 2000 frontier-research projects were up and running in around 470 prestigious research institutions in Europe.
- As of 2011, thirty-six ERC grantees have received prestigious international scientific prizes and awards, among which 4 Nobel Prizes and 3 Fields Medals.
- The number of articles acknowledging ERC funding published in peer-reviewed journals increased from over 1200 in 2010 to above 1750 in 2011, totalising more than 3400 since 2008. This is a combination of rising number of projects and maturing projects producing more results.
- Focusing on articles in the *two of the most-cited scientific journals (Nature and Science)* it can be seen that the ERC footprint is rapidly increasing. In 2011, every week at least one ERC-funded project published its findings in either Nature or Science. This corresponded to every two weeks and every seven weeks in 2010 and 2009 respectively.

In 2010, the Commission, the ERCEA and the Scientific Council took action on the recommendations of the ERC Review of structures and mechanisms<sup>7</sup>. In a Decision amending

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<sup>6</sup> COM(2011) 809 final of 30.11.2011

the Decision establishing the ERC<sup>8</sup>, the Commission confirmed the arrangements for the local support to the Chair and Vice-Chairs of the Scientific Council at their places of work and introduced an honorarium for attendance at the Scientific Council plenary meetings, in recognition of the personal commitment of the members of the Scientific Council and the time they have to devote to ERC tasks. The same decision introduced the concept of a Standing Identification Committee for the identification of future Scientific Council members. These measures were made operational and were provided with a budget in the revision of the Ideas Work programme in March 2011<sup>9</sup>.

On ERC governance, and in close contact with the Scientific Council, the Commission undertook a further reflection on a sustainable and forward-looking solution, in view of Horizon 2020. This reflection was entrusted to a Task Force, set up in December 2010 and which included representatives of the Scientific Council, the ERC Review Panel and the Commission<sup>10</sup>. The report of the ERC Task Force was published on 12 July 2011<sup>11</sup> and was transmitted to the Council and the European Parliament. Its major conclusion is that in the timescale of Horizon 2020, the future of the ERC is better assured within the structure of an Executive Agency. The report is very much in line with the conclusions of the ERC Review of 2009. It acknowledges the ERC's remarkable success so far and proposes measures for the improvement of its operations. One of the recommended innovations is the provision for a quasi full-time, Brussels-based ERC President, a provision that would dispense with the need for an ERC Secretary General. The recommendations of the Task Force have been incorporated in the Commission's proposals for the specific programme implementing Horizon 2020<sup>12</sup>.

#### **4. STRUCTURE OF THE EUROPEAN RESEARCH COUNCIL**

##### **4.1. The Scientific Council**

The renewal of one third of the members of the Scientific Council took effect in January 2011 and was presented in last year's annual report<sup>13</sup>. The standing Identification Committee continues its search for future members and in December 2011 announced the consultation of the scientific community<sup>14</sup> for the next identification exercise, due in October 2012.

Following the renewal of the Scientific Council, Professors Pavel Exner and Carl-Henrik Heldin, both founding members of the Scientific Council, were elected as Vice-chairs<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Review Panel Report: *Towards a world class Frontier Research Organisation: Review of the European Research Council's Structures and Mechanisms* (23 July 2009). <http://erc.europa.eu/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.display&topicID=158> Response of the Commission: Communication to the Council and Parliament C(2009) 552 final of 22.10.2009 [http://ec.europa.eu/research/evaluations/pdf/archive/other\\_reports\\_studies\\_and\\_documents/commission\\_communication\\_on\\_the\\_erc\\_review\\_-\\_22\\_october\\_2009.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/research/evaluations/pdf/archive/other_reports_studies_and_documents/commission_communication_on_the_erc_review_-_22_october_2009.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Decision 2011/12/EU of 12.1.2011, OJ L 9, 13.1.2011, p.5

<sup>9</sup> C(2011) 1848 of 24.03.11, not published

<sup>10</sup> Press release IP/10/1759

<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/10/1759&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=fr>

<sup>11</sup> <http://erc.europa.eu/about-erc/reviews-and-development-erc>

<sup>12</sup> COM(2011) 811 final of 30.11.2011

<sup>13</sup> COM(2011) 497 of 17.8.2011

<sup>14</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/research/index.cfm?pg=newsalert&lg=en&year=2011&na=na-121211>

<sup>15</sup> [http://erc.europa.eu/pdf/ERC\\_Press\\_release\\_Vice-Presidents.pdf](http://erc.europa.eu/pdf/ERC_Press_release_Vice-Presidents.pdf)

In 2011 the Scientific Council selected Prof. Donald Bruce Dingwell, Professor in Experimental Volcanology at the Ludwig-Maximilian-University of Munich, as its third Secretary General following Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker and Andreu Mas-Colell. Prof. Dingwell took office on 1 September 2011<sup>16</sup>.

The Scientific Council held 5 plenary meetings in 2011, two of which were held outside Brussels: in Budapest (Hungary) in June and in Riga (Latvia) in October. The summary of the plenary meetings is published on the ERC website<sup>17</sup>.

In addition to plenary sessions, members of the Scientific Council meet in Working Groups addressing specific issues. In 2011, various meetings of the ERC Working Groups on “Innovation and Relations with Industry”, “Open Access”, “Internationalisation” and “Gender Balance” were organised by the Executive Agency. The Working Groups carry out analysis and contribute to the ERC scientific strategy through proposals to be adopted by the Scientific Council in plenary in the areas covered by their mandates: examine the ERC’s relationship with the industrial/business sector and the impact of ERC-funded research on innovation; develop an ERC position on open access; explore suitable mechanisms to boost the participation of non-European researchers, particularly from Brazil, Russia, India and China (the BRIC countries), in the ERC schemes; ensure that the ERC is at the forefront of best practice regarding the gender balance of grantees.

The Scientific Council has two Standing Committees, one on peer review and one on conflict of interest and scientific misconduct. A series of working documents containing analysis and key messages on the specific issues dealt with by the Working Groups and by the Standing Committees were prepared by the Executive Agency, in conjunction with members of the groups.

To further assure its liaison with the European Commission and the Executive Agency, the Chair and vice Chairs of the Scientific Council, the ERC Secretary General and the Director of the Agency meet regularly as the ERC Board. These meetings are also attended by the senior management of the Agency. The Board met in Brussels 10 times in 2011, in particular to prepare or to follow up the meetings of the Scientific Council.

The Scientific Council's plenary meetings and the meetings of its members with ERC stakeholders are prepared with the organisational and administrative support of the Executive Agency. The Agency also provides advice and analysis to facilitate the Scientific Council to fulfil its tasks as described in Annex 1 of the *Ideas* Specific Programme, as well as support to the operational activities of its Working Groups and permanent committees.

#### **4.2. The ERC Executive Agency**

Since July 2009 the Agency has been responsible for all aspects of administrative implementation and programme execution as provided for in the Work Programme.

The operations of the Agency are supervised by a Steering Committee, appointed by the Commission. In line with the conclusions of the ERC Task Force, the membership of the Steering Committee was modified to include as external members two members of the Scientific Council, Profs Sierd Cloetingh and Tomasz Dietl. The Committee is chaired by the

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<sup>16</sup> [http://erc.europa.eu/pdf/ERC\\_Press\\_release\\_New\\_Secretary\\_General.pdf](http://erc.europa.eu/pdf/ERC_Press_release_New_Secretary_General.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> <http://erc.europa.eu/about-erc/organisation>



Director-General of DG Research and Innovation and the ERC Secretary-General is an observer. In 2011, the Steering Committee held four meetings and adopted decisions related to the Agency's Annual Work Programme, budget and accounts. At each of its meetings, the Steering Committee received a detailed progress report from the Director of the Agency.

#### 4.2.1. Agency Staff

The 2011 operating budget provided for an establishment plan of 100 temporary agents and a budget for 253 contract staff and 7 seconded national experts, adding up to a total of 360 agents.

At the end of December 2011, the Agency employed a total of 350 agents: 97 temporary agents, 245 contract agents and 8 seconded national experts.

Statistics of December 2011 show that the Agency employs approximately 36% men and 64% women. As regards the gender balance of highly specialised staff (temporary agents and contract agents in Function Group IV), 54% of the posts are occupied by women. At the end of 2011 the ERC Executive Agency employed nationals from 24 Member States. Pablo Amor succeeded Jack Metthey as Director ad interim of the ERC Executive Agency on 1 January 2011.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK FOR 2012

The ERC grants have been well received by the research community. Since its start in 2007 the ERC has completed eight calls for proposals for the Starting and Advanced Grant schemes. The competitions yielded a total of over 26000 proposals out of which more than 2500 have been selected for funding through a rigorous peer review.

In 2012, the Scientific Council will introduce the *Synergy Grants* to enable small groups of researchers to bring together complementary skills, knowledge and resources, in order to jointly address research problems at the frontier of knowledge, going beyond what the individual researchers could achieve alone. The Synergy grants are introduced on a pilot basis and with a budget of €150 million<sup>18</sup>.

The year 2012 will also see the discussions at the European Parliament and the Council on the Commission's proposals for Horizon 2020. One major ambition of Horizon 2020 is to support the EU's position as a world leader in science with a dedicated budget of €24.6 billion, including an increase in funding of 77% for ERC. Boosting the ERC budget will allow more top rate researchers and their pioneering ideas to be supported, and especially younger researchers to be provided with a long-term perspective.

Finally, in 2012, the ERC Executive Agency will have completed 3 years of autonomous existence and will undergo an external evaluation, which will include a cost-benefit analysis. The evaluation report will be transmitted to the European Parliament, the Council and the Court of Auditors.

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<sup>18</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/research/fp7/pdf/wp2012/wp2012\\_ideas\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/research/fp7/pdf/wp2012/wp2012_ideas_en.pdf)