

The ERC: Funding Organisation and European Project

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Abstract In this contribution I will review some of the main characteristics that have made the ERC into the successful funding organisation that it is. But I also briefly look at the ERC from a different angle, that of a European project, and argue that some of the added value of the ERC for Europe might also reside in the contribution it makes to the creation of a European identity.

Keywords European Research Council. European Research Area. Bottom-up research. Research excellence. European identity.

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1 The ERC as Funding Organisation

The funding schemes run by the ERC have a number of distinctive features: they are strictly bottom up; focused on ‘excellence only’; centred around (in almost all cases) a single principal investigator; and strictly competitive, not collaborative.

Strictly bottom up means that there are no pre-determined topics, themes or areas: the content of the projects is determined by the researchers. It also means that there are no pre-determined budgets set aside for specific disciplines or areas of research. The ERC’s operations are organised in three domains (Physical Sciences and Engineering, Life Sciences, and Social Sciences and Humanities), but the budgets of these domains, and of the various panels inside the domains, is demand-driven.

The focus on ‘excellence only’ means that it is solely the quality of the application that determines the funding decision: the innovative nature of the



project and the qualifications of the principal investigator are the only factors that the panels take into account when making their funding decisions. It also means that the ERC does not interfere with the work of the experts that sit on the panels: it makes great efforts to select highly qualified researchers, but it trusts them to make the appropriate decisions in line with its mission.

The major funding schemes are all designed for a single principal investigator (PI), with the exception of the Synergy scheme, that targets projects that require the expertise of several PIs. But Synergy, too, is a competitive, not a collaborative funding scheme. Competitiveness implies that there are no restrictions or demands on the countries in which PIs are located, nor on their nationality. In order to enhance fair competition, the single PI schemes are oriented towards early career, mid-career and advanced career stages. Within those boundaries it is only the quality of the application and of the applicant that counts.

In the implementation and execution of its funding schemes the ERC tries, as much as possible, to place the researcher centre-stage. It aims to be a funding organisation 'for scientists, by scientists', and tries to minimise the administrative overhead while, of course, maintaining adequate levels of accountability and transparency.

Judging by the results, the ERC is a successful enterprise. Since its start in 2007, it has funded over 8,500 researchers, including an additional 50,000 researchers as team members. There are several indicators that show that the ERC is successful in executing its core mission, which is to fund world-class, frontier research. Among the grantees six have won Nobel prizes (after their ERC grants), five were awarded a Fields medal, and five were Wolf Prize winners. Over 7% of the ERC-funded publications are among the top 1% cited in their respective fields. Qualitative post-hoc evaluation by independent experts identified some 79% of completed projects as being either a scientific breakthrough or as having resulted in major scientific advances in their fields.

There are several other indicators of the influence the ERC has had so far. For example, some national funders have schemes to finance projects that have gotten an 'A'-qualification from their ERC-panel but could not be funded due to lack of resources. Other organisations finance visits from, usually early career, researchers to ERC-funded projects in order to help them prepare an application. Universities compete with the number of ERC-funded projects they host, and sometimes are actively trying to attract ERC-grantees. To have secured ERC-funding is for mid-career researchers a definite career boost, and for early career researchers it is often the decisive factor that determines whether they can stay in academia.

The ERC is regarded as a big success, it has been referred by Carlos Moedas, the European commissioner for research and innovation,

as “the jewel in the crown”, and it enjoys broad support from the scientific communities that it serves. Yet, it is not entirely obvious that it will be allowed to continue to be a success. There are two main issues on which the ERC, despite its uncontested results, is being challenged. These are impact and so-called *juste retour*.

Let me begin with saying something about the latter. That the different member states would get their money’s worth from the programmes that they financed was a design feature of the early days of European-level research funding programmes. It made these programmes essentially collaborative, with lots of constraints to guarantee *juste retour*. Obviously, that changed when the ERC was set up explicitly as a purely competitive programme, aiming solely for excellence. There is no denying that some countries are more successful than others when it comes to hosting ERC-grantees. Why that is so is a complex issue, involving economic, historical, and cultural factors. To some extent the distribution of ERC-funding reflects the quality and resilience of national academic institutions and research infrastructures. Inequalities exist, and should be addressed, and are addressed. The ERC’s governing body, the Scientific Council, contributes to these efforts by supporting various measures that benefit applicants from countries that perform less well. But it does so only in so far as they align with its core mission. A return to *juste retour* would destroy what makes the ERC special and valuable.

The other contested feature concerns societal and economic impact. The ‘Science Behind the Projects’ exercise that the Executive Agency of the ERC runs provides a detailed picture of how ERC-funded research fits in the overall scientific landscape, in terms of topics, methods, cross-disciplinarity. It also reveals that quite a number of ERC-funded projects do address big societal and economic challenges related to, for example, energy, climate change, migration, health. These projects focus on fundamental scientific aspects of these challenges and aim to push the boundaries of our understanding of them. That means that ERC-funded research has potential impact. What that impact may turn out to be is difficult to predict and it will in general be long-term, rather than short-term. But that has often been the case with major technological and societal changes that have been driven by frontier research. That is not to say that the ERC ignores potential short-term application. Grantees can explore the potential of their projects’ outcomes using the successful ‘Proof of Concept’ scheme. Of equal importance, though not often identified as such, is some of the research done in the humanities and social sciences. Think of the relevance of a deeper understanding of historical developments for informed political debate about such issues as migration or the role of religious identity. Or of the many and complicated factors that determine the acceptance or rejection of technological innovations when dealing with such issues as climate change or obesity.

There are many examples where frontier, bottom up research delivers insights and results that are deeply integrated with societal and economic impact. But there is also research ‘without impact’, for example in pure mathematics, or in philosophy, or in literary studies, or in astrophysics. That type of research, too, stimulates the human desire to explore, to understand, to push its own boundaries, and it thus contributes to human flourishing. To set aside some means to allow people to contribute to that is, I would say, a hallmark of a civilised society, and I am proud that Europe is such a society.

2 The ERC as a European Project

But this is all from the perspective of funding schemes. I want to take this opportunity to also briefly touch upon a different way of looking at the ERC. I want to view the ERC as a European project, as an attempt to create a truly transnational, European entity, and thereby to contribute to the creation of a European identity.

Of course, contemporary science is an international endeavour. And that is true not just of research today. The early modern age saw the creation of the ‘community of letters’, in which intellectuals from across Europe discussed philosophy, religion, politics and the new natural sciences. And in the days of the first universities, during the Middle Ages, students and professors were true vagrants, roaming the European continent, searching and spreading knowledge.

From that perspective modern times have been a regress in certain ways. With the advent of the nation state, and later with the onset of the industrial revolution, science and learning became also informed by national interests, and sometimes by nationalistic motives. The nineteenth and early twentieth century saw fierce competition between various European nations for economic and political-military hegemony. It also witnessed an increased emphasis on national histories, languages, and cultural production as part of the very definition and maintenance of the nation state and its ethnic, religious and politic ideologies and identities.

Science has been both an accomplice and a counteracting force in that development. It has sustained the divisions in Europe, but it also has brought people together across these very same divisions. After the Second World War, a growing sense that there is more that binds us than that separates us has been a driving force behind many political and economic developments. In certain scientific domains, such as high energy physics and astronomy, this was reflected at an early stage in the creation of large infrastructures that are supported by many nations and that serve an international community. CERN is perhaps the most telling, but certainly not the only example. With the creation of the first EU-funded framework programmes other do-

mains became involved in this development as well. Larger, trans-national forms of co-operation in the social sciences and humanities were created, such as the Norface- and Hera-networks, and research infrastructures in these domains that transcend national boundaries were set-up. Initially, the emphasis was on the need for cross-national collaboration and on economic impact. But increasingly the success of these forms of collaboration pointed towards the possibility of something decidedly different: the idea of a European research community, a 'European Research Area'.

As an element of the complex process of creating a European Research Area, the ERC can be viewed as part of an attempt to show that the European Union can be, and should be, more than an economically motivated, collaborative framework, that European research can be a community on its own terms, with its own identity and institutions that are not derivatives of and dependent on national identities and institutions.

Of course, it is not possible to create a community by sheer will, or just by handing out money. It requires a change in mind-set, of researchers, of administrators, of politicians, and of the public at large. That is extremely hard work, and both the past and the present bear witness to the many challenges that such an endeavour has to face.

One would hope that the success of the ERC contributes to the realisation of this endeavour. For the ERC has a distinct contribution to make here. It strengthens and broadens a European community of researchers by increasing mobility, by allowing talented researchers to build research groups that are internationally composed, and by defining the very idea of excellence in a European context.

In that sense, the ERC is truly a European project. It builds a community, a consciousness, a web of relations between institutions and individuals that is not national, obviously, but also more than 'merely' supra-national. It is European from the ground up. And that strengthens the concept of 'being European', as it applies to both individuals, communities and institutions, as a basic identity.

Funding schemes come and go, as do funding organisations. But if the ERC turns out to have contributed to a sense of European identity, then it has made a contribution that goes beyond fostering frontier science, one that is of lasting importance. Whether it will be allowed to do so depends first and foremost on how well it delivers the task that has been set for it. Everyone involved in the ERC is well aware of that. But that is only part of the story, it also depends on the political will of the citizens of Europe to look at themselves in a way that transcends national, ethnic, religious boundaries and that recognises that behind what divides them lies the promise of a united Europe.

It is my hope that the ERC may continue to contribute to fostering that insight and to strengthening that will.

