

## **Review of the European Research Council**

### **Position of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF)**

The Swiss National Science Foundation welcomes the opportunity of the mid-term review of the European Research Council (ERC) to express its views on the current and future development of the ERC. This position paper builds upon the preceding statement “A vision for the European Research Council in 2013” from 1 July 2008. It is also complementary to the views expressed by EUROHORCs in its statement of 24 April 2009 to which SNSF actively contributed and fully subscribes.

On the basis of its vision for the “ERC 2020” and the main principles behind this vision, this paper would like to emphasise three key messages.

### **ERC Vision 2020**

In 2020, the European Research Council should:

- Be the landmark for frontier research in the European Research Area;
- Fund a limited number of the most excellent projects from the best scientists ;
- Offer a streamlined portfolio of funding instruments, based on the sole criterion of excellence and without structural or cohesion aims;
- Raise the bar for all domains of science through Europe-wide competition;
- Carry “self-management” of science to its highest standards;
- Be part of a network of European, national, and private research funding organisations that collaborate and share their work according to the subsidiarity principle;
- Serve as an example and aspiration base for European research funding through its independent governance model, trusted peer review system, lean evaluation and granting processes and internal administrative procedures;
- Collaborate with sister organisations all over the world to promulgate these standards and help support the introduction of the principle of excellence by all Research Funding Organisations.

### **Background**

SNSF has been a strong supporter of the establishment of the European Research Council and since its inception has been active in building a strong and constructive relationship with the ERC both at a strategic and operational level. Thus, the present position reflects two years of close collaboration and contacts with the ERC.

In spite of the exceptional level of activity and exposure of the ERC over these two years, such a period is rather short both in terms of its institutional establishment and of the funding cycle of the ERC. It is therefore difficult at this stage to have a solid basis for a complete review of the

ERC. Additionally, the creation of the Executive Agency is still in the making and its effects on the operations of the ERC remain yet to be seen.

This statement therefore tries to look beyond the present situation and the preceding two years to highlight a number of issues and principles that should be addressed regardless of the current changes and possible adaptations.

## **The case for a European Research Council**

Echoing the voices of the research community, national Research Funding Organisations (RFO) in Europe have strongly supported the establishment of a strong and independent European Research Council (ERC). In SNSF's view, the competitive arena at European level created by the ERC represents a unique opportunity to set benchmarks, to evaluate the quality of national research systems whilst also giving a strong signal for more support for free basic research in Europe.

SNSF welcomes the establishment of the ERC and acknowledges the fact that it has introduced a new dynamic into the funding of free basic research in Europe. In specific fields such as peer reviewing, the ERC has also shed additional light onto already debated issues like the increasing difficulty to recruit suitable reviewers or the potentially conservative tendencies of the current track-record based peer review system. The ERC has the potential and the duty to contribute actively to the definition of new standards in such processes.

The conditions for research funding and for supporting scientists (especially young ones) currently differ considerably among European countries. In that respect, the cross-national competition fostered by the ERC plays an important role in revealing excessive differences in quality. Furthermore, the establishment of the ERC also brings a new dynamic into the European funding landscape, thereby triggering improvement and further development aiming at a system in which European and national funding agencies share their tasks based on the principle of subsidiarity. This principle is based on the conviction that a hierarchical system functions most efficiently if tasks and decisions are delegated to the lowest possible level. In this context, the ERC adds a new dimension of competition between top researchers at the European level, an extremely important element that no national system can offer. In the same spirit, this task sharing should be applied to the funding of large infrastructures which exceed the potential of individual countries. Although the latter topic does not lie within the remit of the ERC, both are examples of activities where action at EU level brings a unique added-value to the European research landscape.

SNSF believes that the ERC is in a unique position to achieve this because it is based on a single, straightforward key element, which is accepted all over Europe: scientific excellence as the sole evaluation criterion. Additionally, both in terms of size and visibility, the ERC has the potential to stimulate a truly European competition in free basic research.

## **Key messages for the review**

On the basis of the views and visions outlined above, SNSF would like to convey the following key messages to the Review Panel:

### **Excellence through subsidiarity**

The ERC should have an uncompromising attitude towards scientific excellence on a European scale. Through its grant schemes, the ERC will uncover structural differences between regions and research systems in Europe. However, the ERC should not be the instrument to compensate for such differences. Making their researchers fit to compete at the European level should remain the responsibility of the national and regional research systems, based on the subsidiarity principle.

### **Excellence through optimal governance**

The ERC should have a clear governance structure based on the principle of “self-management of science”. While remaining accountable to the institutions that finance it, the ERC should be free from political interference and be able to define its own administrative framework.

### **Excellence through best practices in management**

The quality of internal management processes has a direct effect on the output of Research Funding Organisations. An organisation aiming at funding research projects according to the sole principle of excellence must incorporate this principle into its own processes in order to achieve its goals. In terms of internal processes, “excellence” needs to be translated into simple procedures for experts, panel members and applicants, state-of-the-art communication with experts, panel members, applicants and the public, efficient and light grant management and a stimulating work environment for staff and experts.

## **Tackling the challenges: towards a strong and independent ERC**

In the light of these three messages, SNSF would like to address the key elements of the ERC review stated in the Independent Expert Panel’s letter and the Commission’s Communication of 26.8.2008.

### **Structures and mechanisms of the ERC: scientific excellence, autonomy, efficiency and transparency**

According to the above key message of excellence through optimal governance, SNSF strongly believes that the principle of “self-management of science” should fully apply to the ERC, as the optimal way to attain scientific excellence, autonomy, efficiency, and transparency. Therefore, the autonomy granted so far to the Scientific Council should not be compromised in any way, regardless of the legal form given to the ERC (see also below). Moreover, this autonomy should not only extend to strategic decisions, but should include flexibility in the administration of the ERC. Indeed, the efficiency of ERC’s day-to-day operations is crucial to attract the best applicants and peer reviewers from all over the world. Despite the fact that there is only limited experience with the procedures currently in place for awarding and managing ERC Grants, criticism has been raised regarding the financial and legal requirements of these procedures (e.g. hiring of experts, reimbursement of travel expenses, accounting requirements at host institutions). Exceptions to EC Rules and Regulations should be sought, to give the ERC the necessary operational agility to attain excellence through best practices in management.

### **Process and criteria for the selection of the members of the Scientific Council**

Contrarily to the current selection procedure, SNSF believes that a truly autonomous Scientific Council with proper representation of all fields of science and scholarship has the necessary competence to be able to select its future members, without the need for ad-hoc identification committees. Indeed, such committees are usually only of temporary nature and lack direct experience with the functioning of the ERC.

Based again on the aforementioned principle of “self-management of science”, SNSF would support a system by which members of the Scientific Council are responsible for defining the profile of the ideal candidates, following an open call identify potential candidates and, possibly, interview them in order to prepare and make a proposal for the final decision. The transparency of the process would be ensured through consultation of Research Organisations in Europe and timely information on the process to all relevant stakeholders. The final decision should then be ratified by the highest organ of the ERC’s institutional structure.

It is crucial that the Scientific Council be composed of internationally renowned active scientists. For this purpose, the work involving the Scientific Council should be facilitated by appropriate processes and available support, in order to make an active involvement in the ERC’s main body attractive for such high-profile scientists during their active research career..

Political influence from individual countries should be prevented and “fair representation” of participating States should be avoided, in order to guarantee the autonomy of the Scientific Council. The selection process should be institutionalised in a way that guarantees knowledge transfer and allows for stepwise replacements within the Scientific Council.

### **Advantages and disadvantages of a structure based on an Executive Agency and a structure based on Article 171 of the Treaty**

Rather than directly addressing the question of the ideal legal form for the ERC, SNSF would like to emphasise again the necessity of a structure providing adequate flexibility for an optimal implementation of the Scientific Council’s strategy for the ERC. Indeed, the actual nature of the structure is less important than the leeway it gives the ERC to set up the governance, rules and procedures that are most appropriate to accomplish its mission in the most efficient, autonomous and transparent way. SNSF sees this operational flexibility as paramount for excellence for best practices in management.

Beyond these operational considerations, the legal form of the ERC should fully underpin the autonomy granted to the ERC. This autonomy should consequently extend to the structure set up to implement the strategy of the Scientific Council, irrespective of the constraints of the EU Rules and Regulations; the latter should be adapted to the specific needs of the ERC by seeking derogations and exceptions. The flexibility offered by the Article 171 (“*The Community may set up joint undertakings or any other structure necessary for the efficient execution of Community research, technological development and demonstration programmes.*”) could provide the appropriate framework. However, it would need to be complemented by changes to the currently applicable financial and administrative rules.

SNSF would strongly advocate that both possibilities be studied in depth and the impact of each option on the ERC’s operations thoroughly assessed. Only with an optimal governance structure and administrative framework can the ERC achieve excellence in the long term.

## Conclusions

With these comments to the Independent Expert Panel for the review of the ERC Structures and Mechanisms, SNSF would like to contribute to making the ERC a success. SNSF firmly believes that the ERC has the potential to master the challenges on its course and make a significant contribution to the European Research Area. First experiences have underscored the high interest the ERC has raised throughout Europe, and the course set by the Scientific Council has found the support of the national Research Funding Organisations in European countries.

To build on these early successes, it is important to give the ERC the structures and mechanisms that allow it to reach and maintain excellence, through the principles of subsidiarity, optimal governance and best practices in management.

SNSF strongly believes that these principles are essential for the ERC to be the landmark for frontier research in the European Research Area. This is even more crucial as the ERC should become an example and aspiration base for European research funding and a benchmark for excellence in free basic research through Europe-wide competition. An ERC based on such strong principles will gain and maintain the necessary trust of the scientific community, the Research Funding Organisations, the national governments, the EU institutions and the public.

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