

Research RTD, 7th EC Framework Programme 2007-2013: specific programme "Ideas", frontier research

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The Commission presents a Communication on the methodology and terms of reference to be used for the Review to be carried out by independent experts concerning the European Research Council structures and mechanisms.

The European Research Council (ERC), established under the Specific Programme "Ideas", defines a new scientific component of the 7th research Framework Programme and a far-reaching departure from earlier Community research activities. Supporting frontier research carried out by individual teams, on the basis of open competition across Europe on the sole criterion of excellence, it aims to make a substantial contribution to the development of Europe's research capabilities at the very highest level. This document sets out the Commission's proposal on the methodology and terms of reference to be used for the review of ERC structures and mechanisms ("the review"), as set out in the legislation on the 7th Framework Programme. It fulfils the Commission's commitment to come forward with such a Communication by mid-2008.

Selection of independent experts: the Commission proposes to appoint a Panel comprising a Chair and four further members, as well as a rapporteur, and will keep the key stakeholders informed. The Panel would be established to meet certain specific criteria.

Scope: the review must be sufficiently broad-ranging to provide definitive conclusions. It also needs to take into account the various different levels of legislation and administrative practice which, in addition to the legal framework of the Executive Agency as the dedicated implementation structure, define or condition the ERC's modes of operation. This will be of particular importance when identifying improvements needed, including by means of changes to the legislation, and when examining the advantages and disadvantages of possible structures (e.g. an Executive Agency, a structure based on Article 171 of the Treaty, or any other option), since the operation of any structure will be affected by the broader context.

Working methods: the Commission proposes a "Commission of Inquiry" format involving examination, in confidence, of documentary and oral evidence, which may derive from a wide range of key stakeholders' perspectives, including for example, the ERC Scientific Council; the research community (academia, research institutes, research foundations, industry); Member States; EU Institutions; DG RTD and other Commission services.

Criteria: the criteria for the mid-term review – scientific excellence, autonomy, efficiency and transparency - reflect key principles on which the ERC is founded. The paper examines each criterion in turn. It should be stressed that these criteria must also be considered in a holistic way, since they involve interacting requirements; for example the quality of scientific management cannot be divorced from considerations of efficiency. The criteria should also be applied taking account of appropriate benchmarks, for example the arrangements in research agencies in the EU or in other advanced countries. Furthermore, the fundamental requirement for irreproachable integrity in the ERC's operations must underpin the analysis against each and all criteria.

Timetable: the Panel will prepare a final report in which it will provide recommendations and conclusions. It is expected that the final report will be ready in July 2009, and the initial Commission response will be in September 2009. This should include an analysis and evaluation of the adequacy or deficiencies of the existing structures and mechanisms and whether any changes needed can be regarded as "technical fixes" (for example, adjustments to the Executive Agency model) or are regarded as substantive organisational and /or legal issues. The outcome of the review should provide the justifications for the Commission, in consultation with the Scientific Council, to initiate any legislative proposals that are considered necessary.

The European Parliament and Council are invited to provide their observations on the methodology set out here, by December 2008, in order for the Commission to take them into account in establishing the mandate for the independent review.