

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

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The Commission presents a report on the European Research Council's operations and realisation of the objectives set out in the Specific Programme "Ideas" in 2008. It is recalled that the eEuropean Research Council (ERC) was created in February 2007 by a Commission Decision as an ambitious new component of the EU's research policy under the provisions of the Seventh Framework Programme. It is the means for implementing the Specific Programme "Ideas" whose budget stands at EUR 7.51 billion over the period 2007-2013. The ERC comprises of an independent Scientific Council supported by a dedicated implementation structure (DIS) and operates according to the principles of scientific excellence, autonomy, efficiency, transparency and accountability.

This Annual Report of the Commission for 2008, drawn up in co-operation with the ERC Scientific Council, presents the Commission's assessment of the ERC's operations and the achievement of its objectives in its second year of existence. The ERC's activities for this year can be grouped under two main headings.

1) The first is the continued implementation of the programme, in particular, the implementation of the first call for ERC Advanced Grants and the publication of the second calls for the ERC Starting and Advanced Grants. Related activities include the operational refinements to the call management and peer review systems, measures intended to ensure the integrity of procedures and processes, provision of strategic and administrative support to the Scientific Council and communication with the scientific community.

2) The second area of activities concerns the creation of the ERC Executive Agency which will eventually take on the role of the DIS, currently being performed by the Commission. Activities in this area included adoption of a Delegation Act, selection and recruitment of new staff for the Agency and appointment of a Steering Committee. In addition, the Commission prepared the methodology for a review held in 2009 on the mechanisms and structures used to implement the programme.

Programme implementation: in the implementation of the programme, commitments of EUR 523.90 million (global commitment) and payments of EUR 227.20 million were fully executed. These sums amount to 99.988% and 100% respectively of the operational credits of the "Ideas" Specific Programme.

(a) Grants: the Scientific Council has developed two "core" funding schemes under the "Ideas" Specific Programme designed to promote research excellence in all fields of knowledge. These schemes are:

- the ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grants ("ERC Starting Grants"): supporting the independent careers of excellent researchers who are at the stage of starting or consolidating their own independent research team or, depending on the field, establishing their independent research programme;

- the ERC Advanced Investigator Grants ("ERC Advanced Grants"): supporting excellent, innovative investigator-initiated research projects directed by leading advanced investigators, who have already established themselves as being independent research leaders in their own right.

As regards Starting Grants, a symmetric narrowing of the eligibility window, from 2 to 9 years in 2007 to 3 to 8 years in 2008, was introduced. In the case of Advanced Grants it had been decided that the budget for the first two calls (2008 and 2009) should be linked so as to make available to applicants a cumulative budget of about EUR 1 billion over these two consecutive years. In order to ensure equal treatment of all applicants, the eligibility conditions and the application and peer review procedures of Advanced Grant sections were not, therefore, materially revised with respect to the previous work programme.

The 2007 Starting Grant: the granting process of the first ERC Starting Grants was concluded during the first half of 2008. The original budget of EUR 292.2 million provided for in the revised 2007 Work Programme grew to EUR 338 million thanks to contributions from the non-EU countries which participate in FP7. This increase in budget allowed the ERC to fund more grants than the roughly 250 originally anticipated. In fact, of the proposals submitted, 299 applications were eventually funded according to the order of merit determined by the peer review evaluation.

The 2008 Advanced Grant: the first ERC Advanced Grant call was published on 30 November 2007 with three different deadlines in Spring 2008 depending on the domain (Physical and Engineering sciences, Life sciences and Social sciences and Humanities). It had an indicative budget of EUR 516.95 million. A total of 2,167 proposals were received (997 in the physical sciences, 766 in the life sciences and 404 in social sciences and humanities) of which 2,034 were peer reviewed following an eligibility check. This was considerably less than the number of proposals submitted for the 2007 Starting Grant, indicating that the counter-measures taken to reduce numbers while maintaining quality of applications had been successful. By the end of 2008, 275 proposals submitted under this call were selected for funding: 114 in physical sciences, 84 in the life sciences, 48 in social sciences and humanities and 29 were considered under the new inter-disciplinary category. Depending on the availability of third country receipts, funding could be made possible in 2009 for more proposals submitted under this call.

The 2009 Starting Grant: the second call for the ERC Starting Grant was published in July 2008 with three different deadlines in Autumn 2008 depending on the domain. A total of 2,503 proposals were submitted: 1,112 in the physical sciences, 927 in the life sciences and 464 in social sciences and humanities. As the process is still underway, no final data are available on the number of selected proposals.

b) Organisation of the European Research Council: during 2008, the Scientific Council met five times in plenary session. The ERC Board, set up by the Scientific Council to plan the Scientific Council meetings and liaise with the DIS, met seven times during the year. In 2007 the decision was taken to fulfil the DIS's external structure requirement through the creation of an Executive Agency, formally established by a Commission Decision on 14 December 2007 under the general regime for Executive Agencies.

A Delegation Act was adopted by the Commission in October 2008 delegating powers to the ERC Executive Agency to perform tasks required in the implementation of the programme as well as support the Scientific Council. The creation of a Steering Committee is foreseen in the case of all executive agencies, it being responsible, in particular, for the adoption of the agency's work programme and administrative budget every year. Separate premises have been procured for the ERC in Brussels. All of ERC Executive Agency's staff is expected to have moved to the new offices by the end of 2009.

In conclusion, the Commission considers that the main legislative and operational developments with regards to the ERC Executive Agency have progressed considerably during 2008 leading to the Agency's autonomy in 2009. Effective collaboration with the Scientific Council has been a key factor. Engagement and secondment of staff with the Agency has moved ahead and gained momentum, making up for a few initial delays due to the interest and the very large response generated by the first calls for applications.

The ERC's grant schemes will be further developed in future to ensure that they continue to support excellence and that they are administered in an efficient way. Measures intended to increase the attractiveness of EU and associated countries to researchers from third countries are being considered. Adjustments and campaigning are also planned to improve the participation of female researchers. The Scientific Council has agreed to further strengthen work programme provisions that take into account career breaks in the professional experience of women scientists.

The ERC is also keen that funding is not confined only to the wealthier countries and regions of Europe. Within the framework provided by the ERC Model Grant Agreement and other available administrative and legal possibilities, host institutions are expected to make appropriate efforts to attract and retain scientists and scholars of the calibre to be awarded an ERC grant.

At the same time host institutions are expected to attribute the resources of the ERC grant towards the achievement of the goals of the specific research project. ERC grants should support research excellence across the whole of the European Union and associated countries, including countries and regions that are less well endowed with research facilities and infrastructure.