

# Something's finally starting to shift .....

... in the European science policy, there's no doubt about it. Look, for example, at the EC's Seventh Research Framework Programme (FP7) which started this year with a 60% budget increase compared to FP6.

Or take the European Research Council (ERC). For years scientists have been calling for the establishment of an European funding agency supporting pure fundamental research – run by scientists not by EU bureaucrats, free from any political strings and guided by scientific excellence only. Three months ago the ERC was finally launched and has immediately been flooded by a sheer tidal wave of research proposals. Its first round of grants, targeted at young researchers beginning their own research programmes, received 9,167 applications. “The high response rate is a clear signal of the expectations and interest in the ERC by Europe's young scientists and a measure of the need for grants of this kind in Europe”, stated ERC President, Fotis Kafatos.

However, most of the applicants will come away with nothing because the ERC budget will only cover around 250 grants. This discrepancy is too high to draw positive conclusions alone; a view, which is also shared by the ERC's Secretary General, Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker, “From the sheer numbers you could argue that there is a lack of opportunity for young investigators to become independent. It shows that young scientists see this as a last straw to apply for funding, which is a bad sign for national activities.”

These efforts in support of but also being initiated by the ERC can thus be regarded as just the beginning. Furthermore, it is a clear sign that a greater effort is required to effectively explore the knowledge potential across Europe.

Someone, certainly familiar with all of this and who is apparently determined to further increase the momentum already created in European research policy is EU Science and Research Commissioner, Janez Potočnik. Last month he announced the launch of a grass-roots political campaign by the EC. The Commission will publish a “Green Paper” soliciting public comment on a wide range of proposals, including for example:

- ▶ greater coordination of national research budgets across the EU,
- ▶ an open, competitive and attractive labour market for researchers,
- ▶ new pension and career tracks so scientists can move more easily from lab to lab,
- ▶ more funding for pan-European “big science” projects,
- ▶ effective knowledge-sharing notably between public research & industry, as well as with the public at large.

The commission has opened an on-line public consultation on the issues in the Green Paper, which will be available until August 2007 ([http://ec.europa.eu/research/era/index\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/research/era/index_en.html)). Contributions will then be used to draw up concrete actions for the development of the European Research Area, to be put forward in 2008.

The intent, Potočnik said, isn't to centralise European research funding and policy in Brussels but to better coordinate it across the EU so that the bloc can improve its competitiveness.

This is an urgent requirement as, according to economists, the intensity of EU research investment continues to lag behind the US and Japan, whilst China is expected to catch up with the EU as early as 2009.

“Today we are starting a debate,” Potočnik proclaimed. One can be certain that he already has in mind where all this talking will lead. A re-evaluation of the entire EU budget and how it's set will commence late 2008. One of the key issues will be: Should more EU regional-development funds – or, political heresy, agricultural subsidies

– be earmarked for science and technology?

Apparently, the time is truly ripe for a debate on the future of European research policy. Unfortunately, scientists are not generally recognised for being passionate debaters. However, as the political climate really seems to be changing in favour of science, now is the time for the research community to bend over backwards and whole-heartedly communicate its very own ambitions as comprehensively and clearly as possible.

For this very reason, a section of this Lab Times issue proffers a modest contribution towards mobilising the life science community to actively engage in these political discussions. We asked our “friends in spirit” from the European Life Scientist Organization (ELSO) to present in a series of essays what they regard as the most urgent topics in European research policy. You can read exactly what these are from page 14 onwards.

It comes as no surprise, however, that the upcoming ELSO congress from 1-4 September in Dresden constitutes one of the topics. The reason? Well, the ELSO congress has already proven to be a perfect platform upon which to continue the debate on European research policy.



*The Editors*

