

# “Scientific Excellence Only..”

... that’s the headline of an interview with the Secretary General of the European Research Council (ERC), Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker, in *RTDinfo*, the research magazine of the European Commission. Winnacker leaves no doubt about what is the one and only prime criterion upon which Europe’s youngest but most longingly anticipated research agency will base its funding decisions. A few further quotes from the interview:

▶ “Scientific excellence – that’s the criterion.”

▶ “This is typical for the entire organisation – the sole basis is scientific excellence.”

▶ “If all the money happens to go to Britain – that is fine, nobody cares – as long as the condition is scientific excellence.”

▶ “That’s what we wanted all along, that’s what everybody wanted – excellence through competition.”

Although the European Commission finally provided the ERC with a starting budget, which left much to be desired, it was particularly this concept of “scientific excellence only”, repeatedly and emphatically declared by the ERC’s key players, which raised high hopes for the future among the European basic research community.

The time for strong words, however, has now passed. For a couple of months the ERC has been “in action” and must prove that it is willing and able to transfer its concepts into practice. The first test case is the inaugural ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grant programme, which – laudably enough – is aimed exclusively at young researchers. The ERC received 9,167 first-stage applications for about 250 of these grants. Another striking demonstration of the high expectations connected with the ERC’s proclaimed funding policy. Meanwhile, the ERC’s review committees have selected 559 of them and asked them to submit a complete application.

Even earlier, however, *Lab Times* had already received an e-mail on the topic, which caused us to raise our eyebrows. A young German biomedical researcher wrote of her frustration over her own fresh experiences with the funding guidelines of the ERC’s Starting Independent Researcher Grant programme. And at the end of the day, we have to admit, she is right to a degree.

The young lady will turn 30 this year and is currently doing a post-doc at a German research institute. Her scientific work has been sufficiently successful to enable her to finish her habilitation – the specific German qualification instrument for getting a professorship – within a couple of months, which is extremely early indeed. She has already (co-)authored 11 research papers and two reviews in high quality journals, another five manuscripts have been sent for review. Furthermore, she had already received two highly competitive fellowships and successfully applied for her own research grants. So, she thought it wouldn’t be too presumptuous to apply for an ERC Starting Independent Research-

er Grant. Who knows, maybe her performance and research plan would indeed be judged as “excellent”...

She had no chance! She didn’t even write a first-stage application. The reason being that her scientific career had obviously progressed too fast. When she read through the guidelines of the programme she was surprised to notice that scientific excellence essentially was *not* the only criterion for application. Rather, in addition, the applicant “must have been awarded his/her first PhD (or equivalent doctoral degree) more than 2 and less than 9 years prior to the deadline of the call for proposals.” At that time, however, she had held her PhD for only 1.5 years.

She wrote a letter of complaint to the ERC’s Secretary General, Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker, as well as to the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, and to the German Science Minister, Annette Sha-

van. The response from the science ministry stated, “The funding guidelines of the ERC explicitly target an audience, which is more established. It is assumed that this is not achieved by the majority during the first two years after obtaining the PhD.”

In her e-mail our young researcher concluded, “It would have been easier to accept a rejection of my proposal to start

an independent research group than to have absolutely no chance at all.” So, finally one has to come to the conclusion that in practice it is obviously not “scientific excellence only” that makes the individual young researcher eligible for the ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grant.

By the way, under this “two years after PhD” premise, Georges Köhler wouldn’t have qualified for an ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grant with the project he started immediately after obtaining his PhD, which finally led to the discovery of monoclonal antibodies and the Nobel award. Also, Francis Crick hadn’t even written his PhD thesis at the time he co-discovered the DNA structure. And *Lab Times* knows of many other researchers from more recent times who were so successful in obtaining results in highly competitive fields that they first decided to continue with their experiments and to write the papers before finishing the somehow less-important PhD thesis somewhere down the road.

What is the conclusive message for someone who wants to try starting his or her first independent research group via the ERC? Yes, you definitely have to be excellent ... but not too fast!

*The Editors*



**Congratulations on your PhD. However, to apply for an ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grant you’ll have to wait another two years, regardless of how excellent your research proposal might be...**

