The European Research Council (ERC): Putting Excellence at the Heart of European Science Policy

Professor Fotis C Kafatos, Imperial College London
ERC President and Chairman of the Scientific Council

The Origins
In 2000 European Commissioner P Busquin enunciated the European Research Area (ERA) concept. In 2001 prominent European scientists debated at the Swedish Academy of Sciences whether Europe should invest more in fundamental research, and in 2002, during its EU Presidency, Denmark organised a broad meeting on “Do we need a European Research Council?” To the surprise of many, the overwhelming response was YES. Busquin then embraced ERC as a road to ERA, and Director General A Mitsos correctly identified the inherent added value: competition for excellence at the European level. A high level advisory group established by the Copenhagen meeting (lead by F Major) and another from ESF (lead by R Sykes) concurred with arguments. In August 2004 a large number of leading scientists signed the manifesto of the grass-root “Initiative for Science in Europe” in support of the ERC. Potočnik accepted the committee’s 22-person proposal in full. Ever since, the (non-remunerated) ScC has served as the driver for the ERC, even before being established formally (which will occur in early 2007, following the legal decisions for starting FP7).

The Rationale and Prospects
One important reason for the ERC is that science and knowledge are at the heart of European civilisation – our identity. Further, Europe can only compete as a Knowledge Society, based on the knowledge triangle: Education/Research/Innovation. And it is a triangle: investment in research excellence is an imperative, not an option. We must generate, attract and retain top research talent by modernising our research system; invest consistently across our narrow borders in a globalised world; encourage the young by establishing attractive career paths and a competitive Champions League for setting standards, as in football. Since October 2005 the ScC has developed our strategy and made critical decisions. To avoid a fatal split between strategy development and implementation, we created an ERC Board with our Chair and Vice-Chairs, the Director of the EA and our experienced Secretary-General E-L Winnacker. We selected a clear and compelling strategy to address to obvious gaps in Europe, by creating the three Rs: Recruit, Retain top talent. The Origins

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