

Response of the EIROforum to the draft report of the European Research Council Expert Group

The EIROforum¹ has been following the discussions concerning the possible formation of a European Research Council (ERC) with great interest, and, at the EIROforum Assembly held in Brussels on 27-28 October 2003, prepared the following short response to the draft "Summary Document" of the ERC Expert Group, dated 25 September 2003.

Although much work remains to be done before the scope, mandate and funding mechanisms of the ERC are fully defined, we welcome the proposed creation of an ERC as an important additional tool that will help Europe become "the most advanced and dynamic knowledge-based society in the world" - the objective defined for the European Union countries by the Lisbon summit of EU heads of state and government in March 2000.

We support the concept of the ERC as a mechanism for the provision of significant additional European funding for investigator-driven research, which can help promote scientific excellence throughout Europe and thus increase the effectiveness of the European Research Area (ERA). We understand that it will issue regular calls for proposals for fundamental, investigator-driven research in a wide range of fields and organise their evaluation with scientific quality as the sole criterion.

While the ERC's activities might form a new line of action under the Framework Programme, its primary orientation towards excellence in investigator-driven research mandates a specific mode of operation: introduction of a strong peer review system as well as efficient, rapid and lean management procedures, adapted to the rapidly changing scientific challenges at hand. The ERC should participate in identifying new areas of strategic scientific interest, and rapidly target funding to those areas.

It will be important for the success of the ERC that it integrates with existing national and European research programmes and infrastructures, including those of the EIROforum. Our organisations and their user communities are responsible for and exploit some of Europe's major scientific infrastructures. The ERC could, for example, provide grants to individuals or teams of researchers enabling them to conduct research at an internationally competitive level in connection with the use of these large research facilities.

Finally, we take this opportunity to emphasize that in certain fields building up shared resources is an important and urgent need. Examples from our fields of activity are the grid, biological databases and collections, the astrophysical virtual observatory etc. Such requirements could properly be addressed at the European level, for example through joint action between EIROforum organisations and European Community programmes.

¹The EIROforum is a collaboration between seven European intergovernmental scientific research organisations (CERN, EFDA, EMBL, ESA, ESO, ESRF, ILL) that are responsible for infrastructures and laboratories.