

ERC SCIENTIFIC COUNCIL

Strategy Note

The ERC Launch Strategy

1. Objective of the note

On the assumption that the ERC will be included as part of the 7th Framework Programme, and will be accorded an adequate budget, the Scientific Council has extensively debated and arrived at a clear view on the overall scientific strategy of the ERC, during the start up phase.

This note outlines the approach the Scientific Council intends to take, which will determine the main parameters for the ERC's scientific work programme for the start of its operations. By setting out its position at an early stage, the Scientific Council aims to assist the scientific community and other stakeholders in preparing for the start-up of the ERC. It must however be understood that the Scientific Council's further deliberations, taking account of comments received, will lead to more detailed development and possible modification of the strategy indicated below.

2. Context of the ERC's operations

The ERC will have a unique position as a pan-European funding organisation designed to support the best science and scholarship. It must operate at the highest level of ambition to generate the maximum benefit to European research from the activities it pursues. As a new organisation, it should not be hostage to the conventional wisdom; instead, it should take the best practice wherever it can be found, and should welcome 'positive contamination' effects on the European research system.

The fundamental principle for all ERC activities should be that of stimulating investigator-initiated frontier research across all fields of research, on the basis of excellence. Awards will be made and grants operated according to simple procedures that maintain the focus on excellence, encourage initiative and combine flexibility with accountability.

By using competition on the basis of excellence at the European level, the ERC will add value to other funding schemes, such as those of national Research Funding Agencies (which are themselves very diverse in terms of goals, procedures and quality standards). The ERC should also complement and not duplicate other research activities in the 7th framework programme, including the Marie Curie schemes, strategic basic research in support of thematic priorities, and support for European infrastructures.

The ERC should aim to create leverage towards structural improvements in the research system of Europe. For example, since many grant winners are likely to be working within

universities, academies and similar establishments, the ERC could have a strong incentive effect on these organisations by:

- offering greater independence to early stage investigators as an investment in the next generation and towards enhancement and sustainability of the institutions' research capacity.
- setting quality benchmarks, allowing institutions better to judge their research performance.
- revealing in a bottom up manner the availability of top talent in various fields and emerging areas, and thus assisting the institutions' strategic thinking and priority setting.

3. The ERC start-up strategy

In view of the high expectations of the ERC and the enormous demand for funding, as well as the need to maintain and build momentum in the ERC's development, it is imperative that substantial funding starts in the first year of the 7th framework programme.

- In the start up phase, priority will be given to an ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grant scheme (ERC Starting Grant). The objective will be to provide adequate support to the independent careers of excellent researchers, located in or moving to the EU and associated countries, who are at the stage of establishing their first research team or program, whatever their nationality.
- In addition, a second funding stream, the ERC Advanced Investigator Grant scheme (ERC Advanced Grant) will be established as soon as feasible thereafter for projects led by Investigators at all subsequent career stages. The Scientific Council is currently in the process of developing the parameters for this scheme which will be the subject of a future strategy note. The Scientific Council is paying particular attention to the potential oversubscription for funds and the problems this may introduce, as well as to the articulation between this scheme and the Starting Independent Researcher Grant scheme.

It is envisaged that these two funding streams, operating on a "bottom-up" basis, across all research fields, will be the core of the ERC's operations for the duration of the 7th Framework Programme.

It is recognised that this start-up strategy will put considerable pressure on the early development of the ERC implementation structure, even before the 7th framework programme decisions, and will imply also early and effective communication of the ScC's intentions to the scientific community, in the form of strategy notes, press statements and (subsequently) guidelines for applicants.

However, starting with a single scheme and building progressively on that, will allow the smooth development of the ERC implementation structure, testing of systems and procedures,

and building up of experience on issues such as likely proposal numbers. This experience will then be incorporated in the design of future activities.

4. Further development of the ERC

The implementation of the ERC Starting Grant scheme and the introduction shortly afterwards of the ERC Advanced Grant scheme will enable the rapid implementation of “bottom-up” frontier research funding, which fulfils the main expectations of the ERC in a balanced, effective and stable way. This is not to imply that the ERC will be a static organisation. As its experience (and the portfolio of funded projects) builds up, the Scientific Council will be in a position to evaluate the programme achievements, adjust mechanisms and procedures as needed, and elaborate its scientific strategy as this is seen to be appropriate.