



European University Association

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EUA Policy Paper Concerning the establishment of a European Research Council

Systematic involvement of the universities in the debate

1. Europe's universities wish to contribute actively and constructively to the ongoing debate on the establishment of a European Research Council (ERC). This means that universities as institutions - rather than represented by individual scientists - and their national representative bodies, need to be systematically involved. This has not been the case until now, in spite of the fact that the ERC initiative aims at supporting fundamental research, a very large part of which is carried out in universities.
2. On behalf of its members – 34 national Rectors Conferences and over 640 individual universities - the EUA welcomes this debate in the context of the conclusions of the Lisbon (2000) and Barcelona (2002) European Councils, and the need to strengthen fundamental research in the context of the overall objective of increasing research spending to 3% of GDP by 2010.
3. The EUA bases its initial contribution on discussions held with individual members during its 2003 Conference on the 'Role of Research in the University' (Bristol, March 2003) and collective members through the association's Research Working Group in May 2003. The present statement was endorsed by the EUA Council at its Leuven meeting on 4 July 2003.

The arguments in favour of establishing a European Research Council

4. In its response to the EC Communication on the 'Role of the Universities in the Europe of Knowledge' the EUA has underlined the importance of strengthening the research function of the universities. By targeting fundamental research the ERC initiative could contribute to this goal by:
 - developing research capacity and improving quality across the continent,
 - supporting research efforts in emerging sectors and for new research teams, and facilitating inter and trans-disciplinary approaches;
 - providing a clear European dimension, thus making European research as a whole more competitive and also making Europe more attractive to researchers from other parts of the world.

5. The establishment of an ERC would also help to address a number of well recognised weaknesses in the present research support and funding systems, both at national and European level, by:
 - enabling targeted European funding to support fundamental research across Europe, thus combating fragmentation, and creating critical mass,
 - at the same time removing obstacles to mobility, reducing duplication of efforts and facilitating coordination of national programmes.

EUA believes the preconditions for the successful establishment of an ERC to be:

6. **The inclusion of all areas of research:** Like EURAB, EUA believes that an ERC must encompass all areas of research, including the humanities and the social sciences. It would also be important to ensure that there is sufficient scope for the participation of networks of universities within the proposed primarily project based ERC concept.
7. **The availability of new funding:** EUA supports the EURAB position believing that additional new funding would be necessary for the success of an ERC. The alternative proposal of top-slicing existing research council budgets does not take into consideration that there is no commonality in research council structures across Europe.
9. **Independence:** A successful ERC would need to be independent of both the European Commission and national authorities while of course maintaining close policy links to both.

EUA draws attention to the need to address following issues in the ongoing debate:

10. **Infrastructure:** a future ERC that fund projects without providing the necessary infrastructure support would encourage making optimal use of existing infrastructure. However, it could privilege strong universities in some countries/regions to the detriment of others where capacity needs to be further developed. This issue should be addressed by further facilitating the utilisation of EU structural funds to develop research infrastructure in priority regions.
11. **Merit funding:** the principle of merit funding only, and no 'juste retour' is important in order to support research of the highest quality. However, thought needs to be given to ensuring that this does not only privilege stronger, research intensive universities to the detriment of others. Once again, to ensure equity in development, the possibilities of introducing parallel mechanisms allowing targeted use of the structural funds to boost research capacity where appropriate across Europe needs to be investigated thoroughly.