

Speech by – Professor Jean-Marc Rapp, President, European University Association (EUA)

Mini-Seminar on the Mid-Term Review of the European Research Council's Structures and Mechanisms

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1. Introductory Remarks

EUA has been a strong supporter since the idea of creating an ERC was launched several years ago.

EUA has provided its input at all stages of consultation on the ERC - on the profile and membership of the ERC Scientific Council, the nomination of prospective members, the type of ERC grant schemes and conditions of eligibility of applicants, and the range and coverage of peer review panels.

We have also had the pleasure of enjoying a fruitful dialogue with the Chairman of the ERC, Professor Fotis Kafatos, who has addressed EUA membership conferences and participated in the launch conference of the EUA's "Council for Doctoral Education" a new initiative which seeks to play a role in Europe similar to that of the "Council for Graduate Schools" in the United States.

EUA submitted its recent written input to the Mid-Term Review Panel following consultation with its membership, particularly its collective members, the National Rectors Conferences.

2. EUA Views on the Review Report

EUA welcomes the recommendations of the Review Panel Report – and particularly the "plain-speaking" style in which it is written and the robustness of its recommendations.

ERC as a new European funding instrument has, in a space of just two years, achieved both high visibility and legitimacy amongst university-based researchers and university leaders as a mark of research excellence in Europe.

EUA would like to see ERC funding increased in absolute and relative terms within the overall framework and balance of research funding at European, national and regional levels (the latter of which are increasing significant in several European countries).

But, with increased funding, and this is one point on which the Review Panel Report is silent, the ERC funding mechanisms will need to recognize that university-based research in Europe has to be financially sustainable. And this has to be achieved in an environment where external competitive funding sources, both public and private, account for an ever greater proportion of university research budgets.

EUA, as a major part of its work on university financing, has emphasized that European research funding schemes are major drivers in the move towards full costing in Europe's universities. For the future, we would like to see the ERC grants contribute more to helping universities maintain the excellence of research environment in which ERC grant-holders are hosted. EUA has recognized, of course, that the anticipated high volume of applications has been a determining factor in the ERC's decision in the initial ERC rounds to limit the re-imburement of indirect research costs.

Importantly though, the ERC Review Panel's recommendations on moving to lump-sum grants from regular EC research contracts is welcomed and noted particularly by Universities and could be a powerful force in the process of seeking to achieve further "simplification" of EC funding, reporting and accountability requirements. Opening-up "new frontiers" in the simplification process to remove excessively burdensome budgeting, reporting and time-keeping procedures is a parallel requirement in supporting "frontier research" at Europe's universities!

3. ERC funding in relation to national funding

EUA's message here can be summarized simply as "No holes, no overlap". I have just referred to the need to "plug the holes" in external funding to cover the full costs of university-based research and ERC as a European "flagship" funding instrument should lead by example here.

Universities require a range of funding instruments at the European **and** the national level to help support the development of their chosen research profiles and missions. University-based research requires well-funded competitive funding schemes at the national level to build and strengthen research capacity in established and new institutions and new research fields.

I agree with Dieter Imboden (EUROHORCS) that in the future any enhanced funding for ERC needs to go hand-in-hand with the strengthening of national research funding schemes. One cannot be a substitute for the other!

As EUA stated in its written input to the ERA Green Paper consultation – "ERC will only succeed if there is a dual-fold approach on the part of EU Members States through greater priority given to investment in science and technology at the national and regional levels, particularly to remedy the historical under-financing of universities in Europe in comparison to its global regional competitors".

4. The Future for ERC funding

EUA would like to see ERC launch a "third stream" of grants to support doctoral level researchers. It should be European-wide competition specifically for ERC doctoral training awards in which the applicants would apply to be based in a European university **not** in their country of origin. Such "ERC doctoral awards" would be complementary to national funding support for doctoral education and would help consolidate the clear trend towards structured "doctoral schools and programmes" in Europe's universities and would boost their international character and competitiveness.

Such a third ERC scheme would build on the substantial achievements of the Marie Curie individual fellowship scheme and introduce greater efficiency into European-level funding support for mobility of doctorate candidates through the introduction of one major instrument for this purpose. We would like to encourage an open debate on this idea and the appropriate mechanisms and structures needed for it to operate fully within the spirit of the ERC's goals.

Strong support for young researchers in Europe - "the brightest and mobile" - trained in excellent university research environments should be a future priority for the ERC funding agenda!