Comment on the interview
with Philippe Busquin in
EMBO reports, August 2000

Trying to follow the recent debate about the future of European research sparked by the EU Commissioner Philippe Busquin has been a confusing, if not depressing, affair. This has certainly not been assuaged by the Commissioner's interview in *EMBO reports*. The Commissioner has proposed the establishment of a 'Council of High Representatives' and a study group to carry out something called 'benchmarking', combined with pleas for more money and the need for a better co-ordination of efforts across the EU. This does not exactly instil enthusiasm, motivate changes or frighten our competitors. Moreover, Commissioner Busquin proposes the creation of a 'web' to co-ordinate diversified European research efforts. 'EU webs' have been proven to be sticky and impenetrable, more likely to hold up progress than enhance it.

Unfortunately, the Commissioner gave no hint that he really wants to fundamentally change the Commission's role in organising research or understands the need to do so, despite the overwhelming

dissatisfaction among scientists about, for instance, the way the Framework Programmes work (Nature 2000, **289**, 523). The EMBO interview implied that a major obstacle to change was the power and influence of national research councils. But when this was put directly to the Commissioner, the reply was vague and incomprehensible—at the very least a golden opportunity missed to be constructive and positive. Monsieur Busquin could have turned the argument around and proposed to identify the successful, internationally competitive research domains within the Community with the aim of cajoling others to bring themselves up to that standard. The stock response of the Commission is to assume that their only role, at least in the research field, is to co-ordinate what already exists—no matter how disorganised or under-performing the components are. Why not promote best practice—an outstanding example being the funding and organisation of research in the UK. Moreover, successful research groups, if given the freedom to express themselves, can find collaborators far more quickly and effectively on their own than through existing EU programs. Perhaps the thinking here truly reveals the flaw at the centre of the Commission's philosophy in the research

field, in that the Commission itself has to spend money to co-ordinate and stimulate research directly, a task that might be beyond it. It might be better if the EU uses its unique position to lobby and persuade member states to get their own acts together first. A 'European dimension' of research is meaningless until we are all pulling in the same direction, committed to a liberating research atmosphere. This has been achieved in the USA, where free and uninhibited thinking from scientists is allowed to flourish, unstifled by bureaucracy.

When asked about what measures to employ to keep and attract scientists to Europe instead of seeing them leave to the USA, the Commissioner produced a contorted answer, which implied that Europe had not a single centre of excellence comparable to those in the USA. Does our Commissioner for Research really believe that?

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DOI: 10.1093/embo-reports/kvd095