The ERC: from before then to anniversary celebrations

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The European Research Council (ERC) is now 10 years old. This beautiful child has grown and thrived, and its many parents should look at it with pride. I first wrote about the ERC in 2000 [1], because it was a conversation piece among European scientists. At the turn of the millennium, many scientists had given up hope that such a structure could come into being after many barren years of aligning the right arguments for it. That collective expert negative view turned out to be wrong, because of an unusual persistence by scientists and the organisations that represent them, and a change in the rhetoric of the European Commission (EC), which eventually became the ERC's surrogate mother. Ever since, the EU has nurtured and supported, often in inventive ways, the council, which it now rightfully presents as one of its major successes.

Julio Celis and the late Jose Mariano Gago have written an excellent commentary on the history and the barriers that had to be overcome before the ERC's launch in 2007 [2]. Julio was Secretary General of the Federation of Biochemical Societies (FEBS) during that period and the Danish representative in the intergovernmental group that supported the activities of EMBO and EMBL. Jose Mariano was Minister of Science in Portugal for most of that period. I will not do a disservice to their article by paraphrasing it. Rather I will present some of the story behind the series of meetings before the ERC became "an idea whose time has come", which was an often-repeated phrase during those discussions.

The idea of EU funding agency for basic research seems to have moved from the agenda of scientists to that of decision makers at a meeting of the Royal Academy in Sweden in 2001 to discuss future

expenditures by the EU. At that time, the Danish Government had the baton of the Presidency of the EU and the Commissioner for Research Philippe Busquin was using the idea of a European Research Area (ERA) to obtain more funding for research in the 6th EU Framework Program. At the Stockholm meeting, economists argued that the EU Agricultural Policy, which garnered 50% of EU spending, was merely an excessive subsidy and that the money would be better spent on research, which they saw as an investment for the future. However, the legal basis of the EU's Framework Program only allowed it to support research with potential economic benefits that could best be achieved by member states working together. Many also questioned the value of basic research *per se* and whether the EU had a legal right to fund research that is not linked to economic outcomes. Nonetheless, the concept of an ERC was up for discussion, and even at that 2001 meeting, the funds for it were placed in the billion euro bracket. Where would that money come from and hence who would "own" the ERC? There were two responses from the floor: either from the EU, or from national research funding agencies, which would dedicate a small percentage of their funds. It was all heady stuff and many wondered whether anything would happen next.

Luckily, the Danes had already planned ahead and organised a meeting in Copenhagen in 2002 called "Towards ERA: Do we need a European Research Council?" By the end of the meeting, the answer was a resounding Yes, although there were many interpretations of what this would mean. The Danish government, working with Julio Celis, then established a working party under Federico Mayor, who had been the Director General of UNESCO. They prepared

a report for the EC and thereby made the ERC a topic to be considered formally.

While the machine of the EU turned at its own pace, FEBS and EMBO (in practical terms Julio and I, as Executive Director of EMBO) thought the process needed more input from scientists. EMBL had also been involved from the start, and we collectively formed the European Life Sciences Forum (ELSF). It started with an open meeting at UNESCO in Paris in 2003 to represent voices from the scientific community—and more than 300 came. As was the case at the Copenhagen meeting, we did not know the opinions of the speakers we invited. But, again, the meeting quickly galvanised around the concept of an ERC to support excellent basic research. Most scientists strongly expressed the opinion that "their" ERC should be at arm's length from the EC, because they did not trust the commission's selection processes or the "juste retour" concept by which countries gain as much in grants as they contribute to the Framework Program even if their applications were weak. In addition, the requirement that research must have an economic impact was contrary to the focus on basic research. Busquin attended the meeting and expressed his enthusiasm for an ERC, but he stressed the technical and political problems.

The ELSF, soon joined by other organisations, continued on its merry way, holding meetings that refined what the ERC should be if/when it came into existence. Questions arose at an early stage as to restricting it on the life sciences as a pilot project, whether support of research infrastructure should be included, or how to encourage interdisciplinary projects. Some of these (especially how to support interdisciplinary research) remain pertinent and unresolved until today. At each of these meetings, the EC sent a

high-ranking official and their messages were encouraging but always came with new pre-requisites. There were some surprises, such as when the UK minister came to a meeting with a prepared speech on why the UK would not support an EC, but made a U-turn and announced a change in policy and the UK's enthusiastic support.

Because of the strength and cohesion of its organisations, the life sciences were spearheading these discussions, but soon recognised that this could seem like special pleading. In 2004, ELSF broadened its base to include all natural sciences, social sciences and the humanities and established the Initiative for Science in Europe (ISE) that eventually grew to include more than 40 scientific organisations. Now the barricades were manned by scientists from all disciplines who repeated the message that might have sounded like: "What do we want? ERC! When do we want it? Now!"

But an impasse had been reached around the question of who would fund the ERC. The national research councils were muted in their response, the EC engaged at the highest levels but stressed the complications of its involvement, and the time for establishing new intergovernmental organisations had passed. Then, in a complete *volte face*, Achilles Mitsos, the EC's Director General for Research, gave a speech at an ISE-organised meeting in 2005 where he re-interpreted the EU laws: EU-wide competition, including basic research, met the necessary pre-condition of "added value" for the member states. The way was open to include the ERC in the next (7th) Framework Program, which happened formally in 2006. Much clever wordsmithing ("basic research" became

"frontier research") and fresh interpretations of treaties and rules were required, but once the EC had embraced the project, it moved forward very fast.

And so we are celebrating 10 years of the ERC. The scientific community has engaged with enthusiasm both as applicants and as judges as the spirit of the ERC is clearly in line with the ideas of those who participated in its formation. The outcomes are fantastic: when I have a new applicant for a position who has successfully applied for an ERC award, I immediately know that she or he is top class. That was the aim all along: to identify and support excellence.

However, there is some reason for concern as some countries have such a low level of success that it must be demoralising for their researchers, who are mostly working with inadequate support and infrastructure, and for their politicians. Every country has its research stars in its gold fish bowl, and these are the major benefactors of local funding. When they are "also-rans" in a European wide competition, it raises hard questions. Just to illustrate the problem: with a budget of 1.67 billion in 2016, the ERC awarded eight grants to Poland, The Czech Republic, Estonia and Portugal collectively whereas 34 grants went to the Netherlands—which is ranked 4th in the national list of winners that year. University College London alone (ranked as the fifth most successful institute) accounts for much more grants than all Eastern European countries combined since the start of the ERC.

I therefore retain my view that it would be good for European science and for the long-term success of the ERC, if there were a second-tier competition analogous to the

Europa League in which wannabe Champions League teams can improve. Usually, this gets the counter argument that it would diminish the principle of selection based solely on excellence. However, a particular situation or problem needs a specific response. This was the basis for the starting grants to support early-stage researchers that excluded the well-established research leaders in Europe. Similarly, a special excellence-based funding restricted to competitive researchers in countries that are in the lower half of the success league could stimulate better research throughout Europe and help retain the best scientist in the countries that most need them. It could also avert a possible backlash against the ERC by those member states that are getting fewer awards than a single research centre in one of the leading countries. Now, the ERC heads into its teen years. These can be turbulent—for instance, the potential impact of Brexit—but also the time for maturing and decisions for the longer haul.

And yet, there is plenty to celebrate. The ERC has provided scientists with the opportunity to explore interesting new ideas and to be daring rather than proposing incremental projects. All involved since its launch—the ERC Scientific Council, the Steering Committee, the EC, and the hundreds of scientists that contribute to it have done a great service to Europe. As a proud parent, I salute the ERC and the hundreds of other parents. Cheers!

References

1. Gannon F (2000) *EMBO Rep* 1: 197
2. Celis JE, Gago JM (2014) *Mol Oncol* 8: 447–457