



Brussels News Update

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ERC Grants Hugely Oversubscribed

The European Research Council (ERC) has drafted in extra help to cope with more than triple the number of expected applications for the Starting Grants for independent researchers.

In April the ERC's Scientific Council announced how many applications had been received, and the figure of 9,167 was much higher than many were expecting. Now the Scientific Council has given details of how many of the applications address each of the three domains outlined in the call for proposals, which countries the applications have come from, and how many people have applied to be a member of the evaluation panels charged with reviewing the proposals.

The ERC has also drafted in extra help to handle the peer review evaluation process. Initially, it was thought that the first ERC call would generate around 3,000 applications. To deal with this massive response, the Scientific Council has implemented an emergency plan, inviting a total of 600 additional panel evaluators, who were in reserve, to assist the 244 members of the 20 ERC panels in the peer review evaluation process.

The evaluation and selection process, which started in May, will conclude in July. Successful applicants will be informed as soon as possible so that they can submit a second-stage

proposal by 17 September. Meanwhile, applicants who were unsuccessful will receive feedback by August.

'The ERC Scientific Council is keenly aware that the available budget is not sufficient to fund all the deserving applications,' says the ERC Scientific Council. 'We can only reiterate our commitment that excellence will be the sole criterion: for selecting the first-stage applications whose PIs [Principal Investigators] will be invited to submit full (stage 2) proposals, and for selecting the full proposals that will be funded later in the year.'

A significant number of PI applicants are currently living outside of the EU. 'This suggests that, over time, ERC grants can enhance the competitiveness of Europe by recruiting overseas research talent,' says the Scientific Council.

Cordis:

http://cordis.europa.eu/fetch?CALLER=EN_NEWS_FP7&ACTION=D&DOC=19&CAT=NEWS&QUERY=1183457506118&RCN=27789

ERC : <http://erc.europa.eu/>

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/science/erc-grants-young-researchers-spark-brain-gain/article-164644>

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/environment/groups-unite-halt-eu-biofuels-rush/article-165029>

Conditional Backing for EIT

After months of negotiations, ministers attending the EU's Competitiveness Council on 25 June reached agreement on a 'general approach' to a draft regulation to establish a European Institute of Technology (EIT).

The Council agreed on 25 June 2007 on a 'general approach' on the draft Regulation aimed at establishing a European Institute of Technology (EIT). This means that there is a broad consensus on the substance of a legal act, but that further fine-tuning is required for a political agreement, before year-end.

The ministers agreed on establishing the EIT with a two-step approach, proposed by Germany. This means that, in the first phase, only two or three Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) will be set up, instead of the six initially proposed by the Commission. Further KICs, as well as a longer-term strategy for the EIT as a whole will only be developed in a second step, the launch of which will be subject to evaluation of the institute's activities and deliverables.

Ministers expect to finalise the fine-tuning, mainly financial aspects, and to achieve an agreement with the European Parliament at first reading during the upcoming Portuguese Presidency, by the end of 2007.

However, the Parliament does not approve of the EIT being financed at the expense of other important competitiveness programmes and agreement may be slow.

Presidency: http://www.eu2007.de/en/News/Press_Releases/June/0625BMBF.html

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/science/ministers-give-conditional-backing-eit/article-164986>

Cordis:

http://cordis.europa.eu/fetch?CALLER=EN_NEWS_FP7&ACTION=D&DOC=5&CAT=NEWS&QUERY=1183455597683&RCN=27925

Finance for 'Risky' Projects

The European Commission and European Investment Bank (EIB) have launched a new financial instrument to support research and innovation in Europe.

The new Risk-Sharing Finance Facility (RSFF) is designed to improve access to financing for the promoters of research and innovation projects. Currently the uncertain, risky nature of these initiatives makes it harder for them to attract financing.

The Commission and the EIB will each put €1 billion into the fund over the period 2007-2013, with the Commission's contribution coming from the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7). All legal entities, including small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), larger companies, research organisations and Joint Technology Initiatives (JTIs), can benefit from the funds.

By boosting the ability of the EIB to provide loans for research and innovation projects, the RSFF will unlock billions of additional financing from the private sector for these activities.

Cordis:

http://cordis.europa.eu/fetch?CALLER=EN_NEWS_FP7&ACTION=D&DOC=17&CAT=NEWS&QUERY=1183457506118&RCN=27796

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/science/eu-encourages-riskier-research-2/article-164302>

Opposition to EU Biofuels Rush

EU leaders committed to a 10% share of biofuels in transport by 2020 in March 2007, but opposition is growing from an alliance of NGOs who warn that producing biofuel for EU markets will accelerate climate change, destroy biodiversity, and uproot local communities.

Nina Holland from Corporate Europe Observatory claims that the Commission's plan contains "no proposals at all which would guarantee sustainability". In the absence of such a guarantee, "we need a moratorium on biofuel support, incentives and imports" she adds.

The European agricultural association COPA-COGECA states: "Despite the substantial opportunities to reduce CO2 emissions by developing more effective fuels and transport systems, the objectives of EU policy to combat climate change can only be reached by rapidly introducing bio-fuels in all member states."

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/environment/groups-unite-halt-eu-biofuels-rush/article-165029>

ERA Debate

Mr Potocnik opened an interactive webcast on the European Research Area by recognising that the fragmentation and duplication of Europe's research efforts means a much-needed shake-up of Europe's research system is vital if Europe is to create a competitive research area rivalling those of the US and Japan and emerging nations, China and India.

The background to the event was the European Commission's Green Paper 'The European Research Area: New Perspectives'. According to Mr Potocnik, the main idea behind the Green Paper is not to reinvent the concept of the European Research Area (ERA), but to create the right environment for the ERA to flourish.

Other issues included PhD training in Europe's academic centres, the competitiveness of smaller and associated countries against larger universities and companies, overregulation, bureaucracy and the level of auditing and reporting, the European Institute of Technology (EIT) and a European community patent law.

The Green Paper is open for comments until August 2007. The Commission will then put together concrete proposals that will be included in Slovenia's programme as it takes the helm of the EU at the beginning of 2008.

Commission – Green Paper: http://ec.europa.eu/research/era/index_en.html

Cordis:

http://cordis.europa.eu/fetch?CALLER=EN_NEWS_FP7&ACTION=D&DOC=14&CAT=NEWS&QUERY=1183457506118&RCN=27848

Concerns about Nanomaterials

As lack of scientific data on nanotech's health and environmental risks impedes the development of specific legislation, NGOs call for the application of the precautionary principle. "The need for more evidence does not have to stop us from taking action now," they claim.

While nanotech products are already being mass-produced, the political debate on regulating nanotechnologies is just beginning. The EU's Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENHIR), which has analysed whether the current nanotech risk-assessments are good enough for developing legislation, agreed that improvement is needed.

The issue was debated in a session of the Commission's Green Week in Brussels on 13 June

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/environment/ngos-urge-precautionary-principle-use-nanomaterials/article-164619>

Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENHIR) Report on nanotechnologies:

http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_risk/committees/04_scenihir/docs/scenihir_o_003.pdf

Transport Sector Must Reduce GHGs

The transport sector, with its significant contribution to greenhouse-gas emissions and ever-increasing growth rates, is going to feel the heat of EU regulation, European transport ministers pledged at a meeting on 8 June one new "energy strategy for transport".

Alongside measures to cap CO₂ emissions from cars and to include aviation in its carbon emissions-trading scheme, the Council also called for maritime shipping, inland waterways and railways to take up a larger share of freight transport. However, trains and ships will also have to become cleaner and more efficient.

Developing alternative and renewable fuels is also a top priority, ministers said. However, warning of the potential negative side-effects linked with the development of biofuels, they requested that the Commission present a scheme for the certification of biofuels on the basis of sustainability criteria and their contribution to cutting greenhouse-gas emissions.

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/transport/ministers-place-transport-eye-climate-change-storm/article-164457>

Transport Council: [Conclusions on a European energy strategy for transport](#)   (8 June 2007)

Lack of Support for Business RD Investment

Despite multiple EU initiatives aimed at increasing investment in research, the average R&D intensity stagnates since the mid-1990s, according to new Commission data. Research

Commissioner Janez Potočnik has urged member states to put in practice the agreed policy measures to support private-sector investment.

The Commission report, which brings together different statistics on research and development in Europe up to 2005 shows no sign of improvement, with R&D intensity (R&D expenditure as percentage of GDP) stagnating since the 90s.

Commission: [Key figures 2007 on science, technology and innovation](#)   (11 June 2007)

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/science/eu-states-urged-support-business-rd-investment/article-164519>

EU States Urged to Develop Research Infrastructures

Science stakeholders have asked member states to develop national plans for large-scale research infrastructures so that the implementation of a European road map, adopted in 2006, can begin.

The European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI) published, in October 2006, its first road map for new European research infrastructures. It identified 35 large-scale infrastructure projects, but so far, only one of the 35 projects identified, the European X-Ray Laser project, XFEL, has gathered the necessary funding commitments.

European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI): <http://cordis.europa.eu/esfri/>

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/science/eu-states-urged-develop-research-infrastructures/article-164301>

EU Nuclear Energy Debates

The EU Nuclear Energy Forum (ENEF) is to meet twice annually and will be organised jointly by the Czech Republic and Slovakia. It is intended that the forum should encourage renewed discussion and debate on the future of nuclear energy in Europe.

The first meeting is likely to take place in Bratislava either at the end of September or beginning of October 2007 (with a more specific time to be announced by Slovakia).

The discussion forum on nuclear energy should "allow all the relevant stakeholders to hold an open and transparent debate on nuclear energy". The aim of the forum is to re-launch discussions on nuclear energy in Europe. Representatives from EU institutions, member states, industry companies, NGOs and academia will discuss how nuclear energy can contribute to European energy policies, reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and enhance the security of energy supply and competitiveness.

The forum will also seek to define the needs, problems and risks of nuclear power and to find ways in which to tackle them.

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/energy/prague-bratislava-host-eu-nuclear-energy-debates/article-164841>

Germany Urged to Reconsider Nuclear Phase-Out

Plans to shut down all nuclear plants in the next 15 years will have an adverse impact on the country's energy security, economic efficiency and efforts to curb greenhouse-gas emissions, warned the IEA in a country review, published on 4 June.

While praising Germany's "commitment to sound energy policies", the International Energy Agency (IEA) said that important challenges remained, with the planned nuclear phase-out chief among them.

Green campaigners say the argument that nuclear should be part of the solution to climate change is "a red herring" and that nuclear could not survive on a liberalised energy market without massive government support.

International Energy Agency (IEA): [Energy Policies of IEA Countries – Germany 2007 Review](#) | [Executive summary](#) (4 June 2007)

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/energy/germany-urged-reconsider-nuclear-phase/article-164270>

EU's REACH Law Enters into Force

The regulation on the Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of Chemicals (REACH) continues to evoke controversy as it enters into force on 1 June.

One of the longest sagas in EU legislative history, the drafting and adoption of REACH, took more than four years and was characterised by heavy lobbying from industry, environmental and consumer groups.

The European Chemicals Agency in Helsinki, which is conducting the screening process, becomes operational on 1 June 2007 and will begin accepting the first registrations one year later.

It will take at least three to four years before the first substances are registered or, if they are considered too dangerous, replaced by less toxic substances.

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/environment/eu-reach-law-enters-force-amid-controversy/article-164165>

Biomonitoring - 'Controversial' Science

Human biomonitoring (HBM), the analysis of blood, tissue, urine or hair samples to detect the presence of certain substances in the human body, is still controversial, panellists agreed during a further Green Week debate.

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/environment/biomonitoring-perceived-controversial-science/article-164542>

Science Education

A Commission expert group on science education in Europe has recommended a radical change in the pedagogical methods used to teach science in schools.

Euractiv.com: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/science/teachers-need-change-science-education/article-164655>

Ministers Boost Euro-Mediterranean Research Cooperation

Research cooperation around the Mediterranean has been given a boost with the adoption of a declaration 'Towards a Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education and Research Area' during the first Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on Higher Education and Scientific Research.

Cordis:

http://cordis.europa.eu/fetch?CALLER=EN_NEWS_FP7&ACTION=D&DOC=8&CAT=NEWS&QUERY=1183455597683&RCN=27883

Three Western Balkan countries and Turkey join FP7

Croatia, Serbia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are now eligible to compete on an equal footing with EU Member States in the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7). A similar agreement was also recently signed between Turkey and the Commission.

In gaining 'associated status', the signatory countries will now be able to participate in all the FP7 calls for proposals, including those opened since the beginning of the year.

Cordis:

http://cordis.europa.eu/fetch?CALLER=EN_NEWS_FP7&ACTION=D&DOC=12&CAT=NEWS&QUERY=1183455597683&RCN=27874



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