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EuCheMS statement on the European Research Council

EuCheMS welcomes the opportunity to contribute to discussions on the strategy of the European Research Council (ERC).

EuCheMS brings together national chemical societies and professional institutions and related organisations across Europe and provides a point of expertise and consensus on key scientific issues. It aims to enhance the quality of scientific research, to promote high standards of education and training across Europe and to support younger chemists.

EuCheMS is active in organising high quality European scientific conferences, sponsoring cutting-edge research meetings in chemical and molecular sciences and interdisciplinary areas. The first EuCheMS European Chemistry Congress will be held in Budapest in August 2006.

EuCheMS is a 'not-for-profit' organisation. Its advice is independent and based upon the best available scientific knowledge.

EuCheMS draws its expertise and advice from the 150,000 chemical scientists belonging to 50 members societies in over 35 European countries. Formerly known as the Federation of European Chemical Societies, it was founded in 1970.

This document represents the views of EuCheMS and has been put together by the EuCheMS EU Policy Board in consultation with its Executive Committee.

This position paper covers the following

- 1. Key issues**
- 2. Proposed Scheme for Young Researchers**
- 3. ERC Launch strategy**
- 4. Relationship between the ERC and the European Commission**
- 5. Consultation processes**

1. Key issues

- EuCheMS supports the formation of the European Research Council (ERC) and is keen to consult with, and co-operate closely with, the ERC.
- EuCheMS believes that as the ERC develops its policies and strategies it should not aim to replace the programmes of nation-state research councils but rather it should complement these at the European level. In this manner the ERC will build its own distinctive character as well as add strength overall to the European science scene.
- EuCheMS reminds the ERC of the strong emphasis that the European Parliament and Framework Programme 7 has placed on fundamental research within the chemical sciences as a crucial underpinning core competency and it expects this to be reflected through tangible funding support.
- Although the ERC should take full cognisance of the applied research and development imperatives that are being set within the FP7 European Technology Platform (ETP) agenda, it should not simply mimic these priorities but rather look to support first-class ideas and research work that both inform and indeed challenge those currently accepted norms and assumptions.
- EuCheMS supports therefore the principle that in assessing what research activity it should support, the ERC should use scientific quality as the sole criterion for support (viz, excellence of research work from internationally recognised researchers coupled with the imaginative testing of bright new ideas)
- EuCheMS recommends that the ERC should place a high priority on effectively supporting promising young investigators who will be needed to provide the forward thinking research base of the future within Europe.

2. Proposed Scheme for Young Researchers

EuCheMS has noted the recent strategy note from the ERC Scientific Council concerning Starting Independent Research Grants (SIRGs). EuCheMS supports the emphasis placed by the ERC on the importance of giving better opportunities for young investigators to develop independent academic careers. EuCheMS also accepts that support which improves the transition process of moving from working for a supervisor to becoming an independent research leader should be an ERC priority.

However, EuCheMS reminds the ERC of some other similar European initiatives and in particular the Marie-Curie Programme of the Commission, the NEST scheme and also the European Research Award Scheme for Young Investigators (EURIYE). The Scientific Council of the ERC should be very clear what new elements the SIRGs scheme will pioneer and how these will complement the other programmes.

In particular therefore, EuCheMS makes five recommendations to the ERC:

- Explicit terms of reference for the SIRG scheme should be drawn up to define clearly and unambiguously the new elements of this scheme and how they complement other schemes such as those mentioned above
- Mobility should be an important criterion in assessing eligibility (we should be encouraging scientists who are prepared to move around rather than those who are content to just stay in their own institutions)
- The criterion that applicants should be less than ten years from the award of their PhD is too prescriptive. Different approaches and career paths in different nation states mean that it would be better not to specify a specific period but rather to indicate that clear evidence of hard work coupled with diligence in pursuing a research career and evidence of real prospects are the criteria that will be looked for

- d. SIRG research grants should be seen to be distinctly different from a conventional post-doctoral award
- e. Successful recipients of a SIRG award should only have one of these awards over any particular time period.

Concerning the ERC proposal, that panels should be convened from each and every research area to judge research proposals, EuCheMS recommends strongly in deciding on the research areas that there should be a focussed but open discussion with the whole community to ensure a comprehensive, balanced definition of these. At least one of these areas must explicitly address issues related to chemistry and the chemical sciences.

3. ERC Launch Strategy

EuCheMS strongly supports the current ERC position that its funding portfolio should not duplicate other research activities in the 7th Framework Programme. However, achieving this whilst maintaining scientific excellence as the sole criterion for financial support is easier said than done, because of the diverse national funding schemes that exist within the separate EU nation states.

Nation state funding processes range from those which are very efficient and extensive to those where there is little public research money available from funding agencies. Hence those scientists who are fortunate enough to reside in the former countries, where extensive resources exist, may be tempted to stick to their national schemes, whilst those from latter countries may submit proposals preferentially to the ERC.

Such an imbalance in applications, if perpetuated through ill-thought-out parameters and criteria for funding, would be inimical to scientific excellence at a European level. EuCheMS therefore recommends strongly that the extensive attention should be paid now to the drawing up of the detailed and necessarily complex parameters that will be required for the

award of funding under the Advanced Investigator Research Grant Scheme.

In addition, the role of ERC must be to complement the strongly industrially aligned programmes which are being developed within the ETPs and absolutely not just to act as a fundamental science “service” to them. ERC has proposed that in the start-up phase priority would be given to the ERC Starting Independent Research Grants scheme, and then shortly afterwards the second funding stream for Advanced Investigator Research Grants would be established. EuCheMS considers that this two-stage strategy appears logical and notes that the ERC is currently in the process of developing parameters for the Advanced Investigator Research Grant scheme.

EuCheMS emphasises strongly that it expects to be involved in a productive dialogue with ERC on this matter as ERC develops its structures and parameters. It is the view of EuCheMS that, whilst the ERC research portfolio should take cognisance of FP7 imperatives, *e.g.*, the Joint Technology Initiatives, the ERC should be funding research that at a fundamental level challenges current assumptions and thinking.

This is how the European Research Council should enrich other parts of European research activities, whether at a nation-state or European level.

In the context of this, EuCheMS has noted that it was proposed the ERC “would play a large part in the achievement of the Lisbon Strategy to make the EU the world’s most competitive and dynamic economy by 2010”. EuCheMS supports this ambitious goal in broad principle but urges that ERC Research Programmes should not be so strongly aligned with any such macroeconomic business target, important though it may be. We must all be realistic about whether these goals will be achieved, and the ERC, whilst supporting these worthy aspirations, should nevertheless fix itself firmly to its real mission of supporting excellent, bright, creative and challenging ideas that can help ultimately to achieve these business targets at some point in the future.

4. Relationship between ERC and the European Commission

EuCheMS notes the current debate on the relationship between ERC and the European Commission. EuCheMS believes most strongly that ERC should be seen to be a body of independent mind, concerned with research excellence and not therefore closely linked to the Commission and its imperatives. It should therefore be a legal entity that is entirely separate from it.

A structure involving a close linkage would in the view of EuCheMS result in political criteria over-riding a criterion based solely on scientific excellence.

5. Consultation Processes

EuCheMS considers that the decision to appoint the ERC Scientific Council using a Nominations Committee which was independent of both European Parliament and national governments was the appropriate way to go forward and rejects criticism of insufficient consultation with legislative

bodies. EuCheMS recommends that with parliaments, whether European or national, this principle should continue to be adhered to as ERC develops its funding strategy and processes.

EuCheMS also advocates as a strong principle that the national nominees are not there to represent countries but rather to bring their expert thinking to build a European Programme of Research built on scientific reputation, high quality research and track records of excellence. However, it is most important that membership of the Scientific Council should reflect appropriately the balance of key disciplines which need to be supported in Europe at the fundamental research level.

A corollary to this is a recognition of the major contributions that chemistry and the chemical sciences play, and must continue to play in the future, in building the overall scientific research strength of the EU, as well as in stimulating indigenous industrial innovation.

