Funding excellent research: The European Research Council @10

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I. Brief History
II. ERC, a policy instrument
III. Funding à la ERC
Historical excurse

- 2000: Lisbon Strategy, “to make Europe the most competitive and the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world”
- 2000: European Research Area (ERA): “the situation concerning research is worrying”

Why such stark contrast?
“The Miracle of the ERC” (Fotis Kafatos)

2000-3: ERC Campaign
2003-5: European Commission takes over
2005-7: hammering out of ERC as it stands now (more or less)
2000-3: The ERC Campaign

- A group of self-organized high-level researchers
- Ideological conviction: European research, but deserves better (“Loch Ness Monsters”)
- Using conferences and ad-hoc committees to advance idea
- An ERC as alternative to Framework Programme
- But: no patron, no structure, no money (“everybody is talking about something different”)
2003-5 European Commission takes over

EC had its own interests;
New, precise campaign emerging:
- ERC part of FP7
- Annual budget: 1-2 bio
- “European added-value”: competition (based on excellence)
- ”frontier research”
2005-7: Hammering out the ERC

- First “Scientific Council” meeting in late 2005
- Developing “scientific strategy” in 2006
- Formal inception in 2007 (with new FP7)
- First funding call deadline in May 2007 (Starting Grant)
What is the ERC?

- Independent steering body
- Allocation of funding based on scientific quality

Hardly an innovation; but new in transnational space!

Unique effects:
- Symbolic value
- Mobility
- Comparison
Position, Mission, Objectives, Budget

- Currently part of 8th FP edition (“Horizon 2020”)
- Legally a compound of three entities
- Mission to fund “frontier” (i.e., academic) research
- Objectives: competition,
- 17 % of EU FP budget, > 0,5 % of total EU R&D spending
- Three future challenges
Unique mission versus “efficiency”

Tasks:
1) identify best applications (“excellence only”)
2) pay out money along EU financial regulations
Repercussions of effects

- ERC grant decision for tenure?
- Correction of ERC grants distribution?
Whom does the ERC belong to?

“The ERC has been a unique and bold experiment to put the scientific community in charge. It must safeguard this position.” (Helga Nowotny, Science, 10 March 2017)
Attracting applications

Funding opportunities:

- **Starting Grant (since 2007):** 2-7 years PhD
- **Consolidator Grant (since 2013):** 7-12 years PhD
- **Advanced Grant (since 2008):** senior researchers

All funding streams are:

- “investigator-driven” (no predetermined fields, topics, missions)
- Open to all fields of science and scholarship (*Wissenschaft*)
- Decided on “sole criterion” of “excellence”
Peer Review

To legitimize a decision!

Two necessary differentiations:

▶ Principle vs. procedure
▶ Deployment: within scientific culture (publishing) vs. at the fringe (funding)
Allocating funds through peer review

▶ Dual legitimacy
▶ Two objects of evaluation: CV and proposal
▶ Features to look for:
  ▶ Quality
  ▶ Promise
  ▶ Feasibility
▶ Peers: responsible for balancing and judging
ERC, a funding machinery
Inconsistencies of peer review

Implicit expectations:
- Only ambition is to advance science
- Reviewers are open to new avenues
- Rev. and applicants do this for free

Tackled by the ERC through: panels, panel members, process workflow, close observation
Panels

Set of only 25 panels for each funding stream

- Interdisciplinary by nature
- Intention to establish ‘customary rules’, which ‘discourage[] corruption and thus helps ensure that the best proposals are identified’ (M. Lamont)
- Establish common (relational, temporary) understanding of “excellence”
Panel members

- Panel chairs (appointed by ScC): broad knowledge; highly esteemed;
- Panel members (appointed by ScC): broad knowledge
- Remote referees (appointed by panel members): specialists
Process workflow

1\textsuperscript{st} step: assess “extended synopsis”
-> result: short list

2\textsuperscript{nd} step: assess “full proposal” (StG and CoG: interviews)
-> result: funding decision

Each step consists of 2 routines:

a) Individual review of applications (remotely)

b) Collectively assess reviews (and interview applicants) (panel meeting in Brussels)
Close observation

- Do panel members “perform”?  
- Do panels need revision? 
- Are there enough/too many proposals?

Regulation for application is regularly refined
Why is ERC unique?

- Not because of its philosophy,
- Not because of its funding streams,
- Not because of its decision-making principle,

But:

- Funding is transnational (visibility)
- Reviewers are international (avoids informal networks)
- Panels are interdisciplinary
- Procedure is sophisticated/expensive
The European Research Council
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