



Europe can build on scientific intuition

Carlos Moedas sees a bold future for the European Research Council and more projects that copy its approach.

You may have read recently how the United States and NASA discovered seven new planets far beyond the Solar System. In fact, the project was led by a European scientist and there was European money behind it. Lead scientist Michaël Gillon is a Belgian based at the University of Liège. And the work was done with a grant from the European Research Council (ERC).

I think Europe is one of the very few places where we still believe in scientific intuition, and the ERC is real proof of that. The programme celebrates its ten-year anniversary this month.

I am proud that the European Commission took the bold step in 2005 to propose the ERC. At the time, there was strong opposition — including from several member states. Yet it was a success from day one, and has gone from strength to strength. And I am happy to announce now that the commission plans to increase the budget for the ERC by €50 million (US\$54 million) for the remaining years of our Horizon 2020 funding programme.

In ten years, the ERC has become a powerhouse of science. It is recognized as the best in the world in the way it supports fundamental research.

As boring as it sounds to give statistics, the numbers for the first ten years are so impressive that I can't pass them up. ERC-funded scientists have won six Nobel prizes, five Wolf prizes and four Fields Medals. The ERC-funded projects have also resulted in 100,000 articles being published in scientific journals, including more than 5,500 in the 1% most-cited scientific journals.

That means that for the first time, Europe has surpassed the United States in terms of the most-cited scientific publications. So let's be vocal about it.

The strong belief that the commission and the ERC have in basic science is contagious. Its model has been recognized as an example of best practice for national funding.

Since the creation of the ERC, 8 European Union member states have set up their own national research councils inspired by the ERC model. And 11 member states have launched similar funding.

But I believe the council's importance goes beyond science. It shows how the EU itself can innovate. In ten years, the ERC has consistently demonstrated that it is responsive to and understanding of what scientists need. And some of the simplifications that the council has introduced — such as lump-sum payments for overheads — have now been rolled out across all parts of Horizon 2020.

As a paradigm of excellence, the ERC should act as a model in other areas. Although Europe is number one in science, this is not the case in innovation. This is why I am working to create a European Innovation Council (EIC) to create more-effective European innovation support.

If we are successful with an EIC, I believe that this will increase the success of the ERC even more. There are many fantastic ideas for innovation coming from the ERC projects, and a future EIC should help to accelerate their real-world application. It should scale them up so that they have a real impact on people's lives and well-being.

In this way the EIC will complement the ERC, not compete with it. In the next ten years and beyond, we will try to build bridges between the ERC and a future EIC. We need to reinforce the link between research and innovation, but with each keeping its own identity. I believe that the ERC must be a key pillar in an even more ambitious Framework Programme following Horizon 2020.

We in Europe are world leaders. But, as the discovery of the new planets shows, we remain too shy in saying so. As we head into important discussions on the future of the EU, there will be many pressures on the future EU budget. So we need our scientists to shout loudly. Don't take the future for granted.

We need our scientists to tell everyone how crucial the EU is for science — to explain why ERC funding is so important, and to make the case that it needs to be strengthened. After all, it is only with science that we can overcome our biggest challenges such as climate change, our ageing population and even security threats.

We must also remain united in defending an open, excellence-based vision of science with the ERC as a spearhead, regardless of how many member states the EU will have in the coming years. The ERC is unique because it has a purely

excellence-based approach to science and one that is geographically blind. I will always remember when I gave the ERC 5,000th grant to a Croatian scientist who told me: the best part of this grant is I got it because I'm the best in my field.

Using the science we have to create dreams that make Europeans proud, let me be bold and give you some examples. We have to be the first to cure Alzheimer's disease. We have to be first to go from a linear to a circular economy. And we have to connect with people through concrete goals that create purpose.

I want to see the reputation of the ERC move beyond scientific circles. In the next ten years, we should strive for the ERC to reach the same level of visibility and public awareness as the Nobel prizes. It should become a household name, not just to scientists, but to all European citizens. ■

Carlos Moedas is EU Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation. This is an edited version of a speech delivered at an event to celebrate ten years of the ERC in Brussels on 21 March. e-mail: carlos.moedas@ec.europa.eu

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