

The European Research Council – a role model for European STI policy?

The ERC is considered one of the most innovative developments in the history of European research funding policies. It is distributing public funds to research projects based solely on intrinsic scientific values – the track record of the applicant and the quality, promise, and feasibility of the outlined research project. Back in 2007, its inception also meant an extension of the EU Framework Programme into the realm of universities and, more generally, academic research. Now running into its tenth year of existence, emergence and early years of the ERC have become subject of critical revisions.

A closer look at the historical roots of the ERC reveals that the three innovations around the ERC really were a) about convincing policy makers and bringing up fresh money for academic research; b) about creating autonomous governance for strategic decision-making in the form of the independent Scientific Council, manned with high-minded research leaders and veteran science managers; and c) about upscaling the decade-old peer review procedure in order to make the claims of the ERC true. As a result, the ERC has been established firmly as the funding instrument that academic researchers most aspire to. Yet while the ERC's mission was a deviation, and expansion, of the core premises of traditional EU STI policy (to stifle competition, instead of cooperation, across Europe), it was – ironically – also a return to the old model of a bottom-up research funding agency directed primarily at academic research.

The aim of the session is to discuss two main questions: the emergence and impact of the ERC on EU STI policy more generally, and the lessons that can be learnt for prospective initiatives, such as the European Innovation Council. It brings together the scholars who have been involved with assessing the ERC as a policy instrument with high-ranking representatives from research funders who have obtained intimate knowledge of European funding policy and the ERC more specifically.

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