

“Europe’s Search for Excellence in Basic Research”

Symposium Consensus

Dublin Castle, 16/17 February 2004

Introduction

The EU Heads of State at Lisbon agreed the objective for Europe to “...become the most competitive, knowledge based economy in the world by 2010”. The development of the European Research Area was agreed as a key pillar for achieving this objective.

The importance of investment in basic research and scholarship was recognized and reinforced at the Competitiveness Council in September 2003 where it adopted a resolution on "Investing in Research for European Growth and Competitiveness" which recognises that basic research and scholarship are crucial for the sustainable development and competitiveness of the knowledge based society. It is also crucial for the training of researchers.

In addition, the Council requested the European Commission to bring forward a Communication covering the entire issue of basic research and the role of the European Union in this area. In response the European Commission published its communication ‘Europe and Basic Research’ on 14 January 2004. A further Communication is to be published by the Commission in the second quarter of 2004.

In order to progress the debate on European performance in basic research, the Irish Presidency Symposium sought to bring clarity to the issues and identify areas of consensus. The symposium, hosted by the Irish Presidency and the European Commission, was aimed at identifying areas of possible consensus at European level. The Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Mary Harney T.D., invited a unique gathering of Ministers for Research and senior ministerial representatives from 27 EU Member, Acceding and Associated States together with high level representatives from industry, national research funding organisations and academia.

Areas of Consensus

- The Symposium agreed that there is a clear challenge for Europe to enhance the levels of creativity and excellence in basic research in the context of global competition.
- There is a need to create a more attractive basic research environment, supported by high quality education, appropriate research funding, research infrastructure, and science-innovation links, where excellent researchers are recognized and can excel, thereby strengthening Europe’s performance in basic research. Europe should be open to the experience of other parts of the world.

- It was agreed that industry needs excellent research and excellent people across the full spectrum of research activity, including implementation of the knowledge generated through basic research, as a basis for competitiveness.
- It was agreed that there is a need to enhance the excellence of European research through the partnership of national initiatives. However, it was also agreed that national initiatives on their own would not be sufficient, and therefore a European initiative is required. The objectives of this European initiative would be to promote excellence in basic research by promoting international competition among individual research teams. The sole selection criterion should be excellence, identified by international peer review.
- It was also agreed that there is a need to provide specific funding for basic research of high quality, in the next Framework Programme (7th), while maintaining an appropriate balance with other priorities and activities in the research area.
- In this context, the Symposium welcomed the Commission's proposals for significant increase in EU research funding including for basic research .
- It was agreed that the Commission should bring forward to the Competitiveness Council proposals for the governance, management and accountability of a European initiative. This initiative, which must have the complete trust and confidence of the scientific community, should involve a new facility characterized by minimum bureaucracy, involve the scientific and engineering communities, both enterprise and academia, in its strategy and overall management. It should award individual grants on a competitive basis.
- The Symposium stressed the importance of reinforcing support for basic research in the context of developing the European Research Area. Europe's policy should be vision oriented as it moves to regain its dominant research position. Basic research should be established as a strong pillar of the ERA.

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