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The DFG and the European Research Area Position and Outlook



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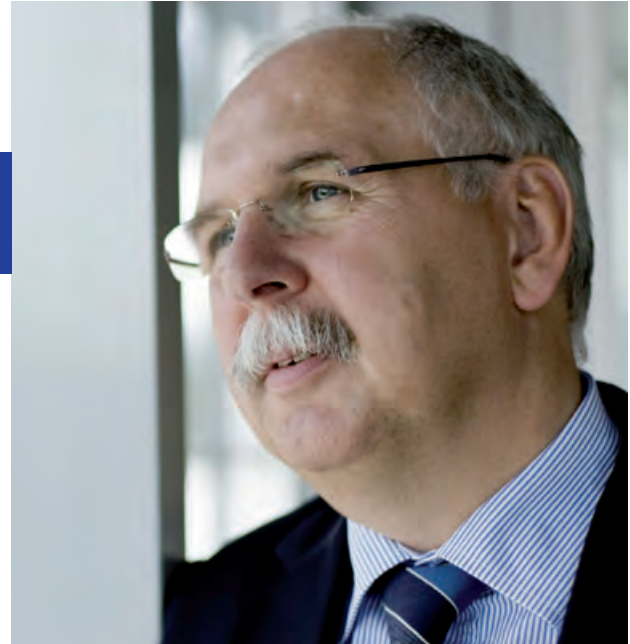
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Preface

Professor Matthias Kleiner, President of the DFG



The frontiers of science transcend political boundaries. But researchers understand only too well that national borders can be barriers to cooperation and exchange. In this respect, European scientists and institutions have achieved much. Research bodies, funding organisations, governments and individuals have worked together admirably in recent decades to promote greater European collaboration.

Europe is characterised and strengthened by its unique diversity, whether social, political or cultural. Such diversity brings with it both challenge, which must be met, and opportunity, which ought to be maximised. Nowhere is opportunity more apparent than within the concept of a common European Research Area.

The establishment of a European Research Area is a goal shared amongst scientific and political entities. Many initiatives have been undertaken by both European and, especially, national research organisations. Widespread agreement on objectives is not, however, entirely matched by agreement on methodologies, funding mechanisms and the relationships between existing funding bodies and those that are envisaged.

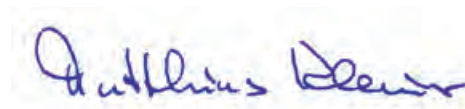
What would a common European Research Area look like in detail? What contribution would be made by national funding organisations, and what scope would they have relative to European funding organisations?

“The frontiers of science transcend political boundaries.”

Compounding this question are the differences in size, responsibility, internal culture and other particulars of the various national bodies.

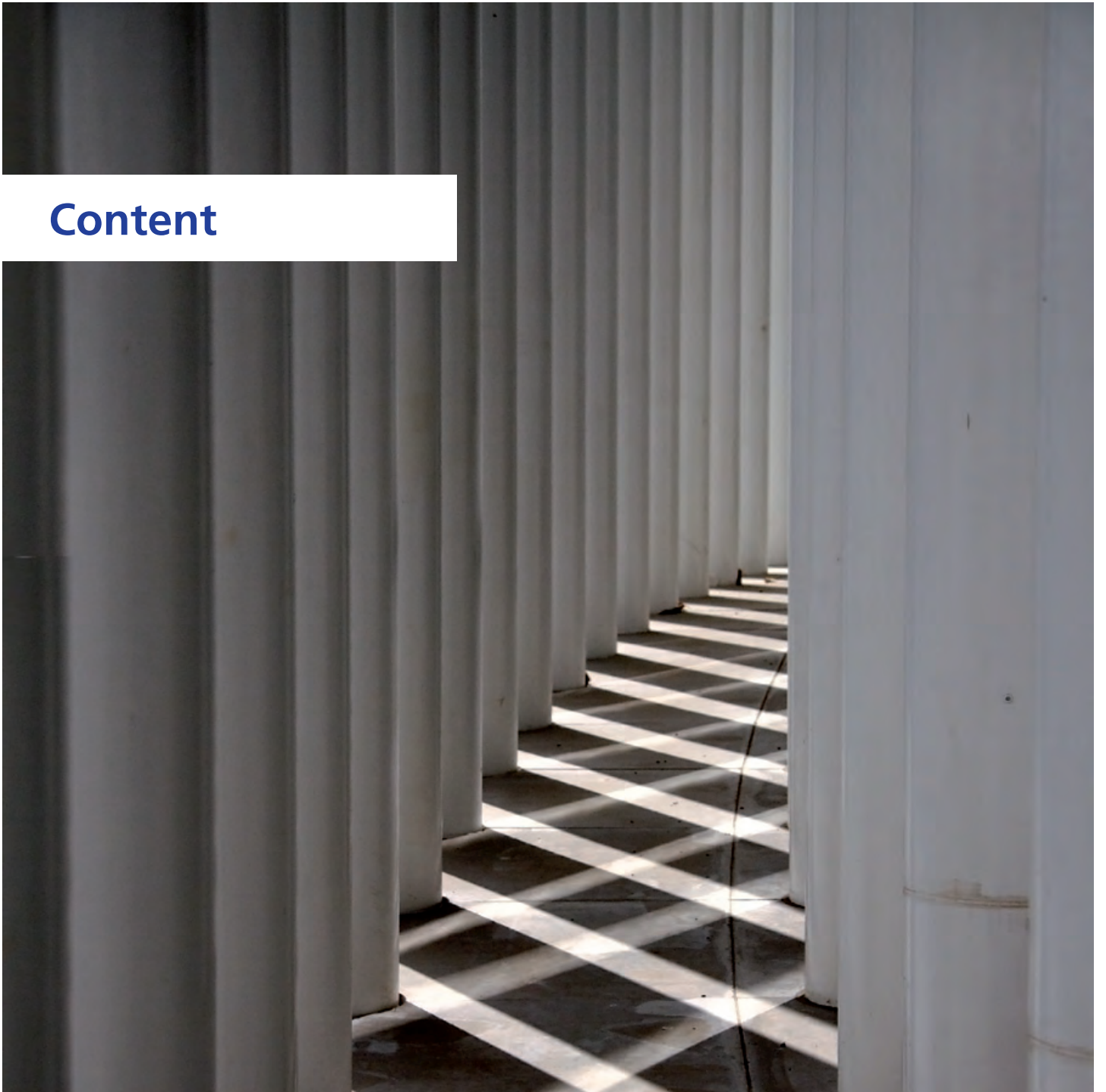
Establishing a European Research Area is inevitably a multi-dimensional process. Success will depend upon an integrated approach that encompasses many factors: from improved collaboration of researchers in different countries and the meshing of national and international funding bodies, to the expansion of existing institutions such as the European Research Council.

The DFG has been active in all of these fields for many years – with great success – and has already positioned itself firmly within the emerging European Research Area. This document outlines the key points of the DFG’s European strategy. It argues that the objectives of a European Research Area, such as increased mobility and synergy, harmonised quality standards, and invigorated competition, should proceed from a bottom-up perspective. Progress depends upon the plurality of funding opportunities at the national and European levels being expanded across the board.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Matthias Kleiner', is centered below the text.

Matthias Kleiner

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DACH

Network of partner organisations from
Germany (D, DFG), Austria (A, FWF)
and Switzerland (CH, SNF)

ERA

European Research Area

ERC

European Research Council, Brussels

ESF

European Science Foundation, Strasbourg

EUROHORCs

European Heads of Research Councils



The DFG in the European Research Area (ERA): Six Objectives

The DFG acts in several major capacities: as a national funding organisation, as a partner in bilateral and multi-lateral networks, and as an advocate of German science in Europe. Within this framework, the DFG will pursue six overall objectives in the coming years:

1) Expand bilateral and multilateral activities

The DFG's bilateral and multilateral activities typically stem from bottom-up processes. These are set to become increasingly important in the future, as they permit rapid and flexible funding opportunities. The DFG currently has a broad spectrum of bilateral and multilateral programmes.

In addition to the specific provision of funding, bilateral and multilateral collaboration also gives the DFG the opportunity to optimise its own standards as a result of dialogue with its partners, and to promote the internationalisation of such programmes. The DFG will continue to back the expansion of cooperation with its European partner organisations, particularly on the basis of the "Road Map to Excellence in Science" proposed by the European Heads of Research Councils (EUROHORCs) and the European Science Foundation (ESF).

2) Attract the best minds

To maintain and improve their competitiveness, German research institutions need to recruit the world's very best researchers and scientists. The DFG will therefore use its wide range of funding opportunities to help attract this sought-after target group to Germany and to retain them in Germany over the long term.

3) Enhance the role of the European Science Foundation

The ESF, as a member organisation, can play an important role in terms of liaising and coordinating within the ERA, especially in instances where joint action by research and funding organisations exceeds the level of bilateral cooperation. The ESF can continue contributing to the implementation of research-led standards, and to harmonising Europe-wide peer review and decision-making processes. Prompted by criticism of the ESF in recent years, the DFG will work, in cooperation with the EUROHORCs, to accelerate the consolidation of the ESF and to enhance its profile, efficiency and effectiveness.



4) Represent the interests of German university research in the European Union (EU)

As the central funding body for university research and the largest funding organisation for basic research in Germany, the DFG represents the entire German scientific community. It is thus dedicated to representing the interests of German university research before the European Commission, in consultation with the German Rectors' Conference, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research and other key players.

5) Participate in the creation of EU framework programmes

Where the EU funds basic research and research infrastructures, the DFG will continue to push for a commitment to excellence, transparency and appropriate competition. The ERC was established under the Seventh EU Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP7) as a science-driven institution for funding basic research. The development of the ERC includes, most importantly, the reorganisation of its structures as well as adaptation of its funding programmes.

6) Capitalise upon the competitive impetus of the European Research Council (ERC)

The DFG is dedicated to promoting the best researchers under the best conditions. The ERC strives to attain this goal as well. The DFG welcomes ERC funding as a supplemental element to fostering competition and argues in favour of the plurality of funding opportunities and against a division of labour in relation to the ERC. The DFG regards the ERC as an instrument for providing additional funding opportunities to attract outstanding researchers to Germany and as a platform to facilitate robust evaluation standards throughout Europe.





I. The DFG in the Context of Current Funding Structures in Europe

1. Summary

The DFG has been active in Europe for many years as a national research funding organisation. Its European activities have always been designed to promote German science and research on the global playing field, and to enhance its international position. In doing so, the DFG supports increased cooperation between researchers as well as greater mobility of researchers, both in Europe and worldwide.

The DFG is active at three levels:

- The DFG acts as a national funding organisation.
- The DFG acts as a partner in bilateral and multilateral networks with other scientific organisations in Europe.
- The DFG represents the interests of the German scientific community before European institutions (such as the European Council, Commission and Parliament).

1.1 At the national level

- The DFG serves as a self-governing organisation for the entire German research community with its various research disciplines, representing their interests and promoting them in a competitive manner. The DFG funds international/European research projects on the same basis.
- The DFG cooperates closely with other German research organisations and research funding bodies with regard to European research policy and European research funding.

1.2 At the bilateral/multilateral level

- The DFG enters into agreements with European partner organisations (in addition to funding international/European projects) so as to facilitate research cooperation by and with German researchers.
- The DFG, as a member organisation of the ESF, develops joint positions, objectives and actions.
- The DFG, as a member organisation of the ESF, supports international funding programmes and review processes.
- The DFG, as a member of EUROHORCs, develops joint objectives and actions for advancing the European Research Area (ERA), in partnership with the objectives of the Commission, in particular the ERC.
- The DFG, as a member of EUROHORCs, interacts with other bodies involved in research policy issues at the EU level (such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, etc.) in order to contribute to political decision-making.

1.3 As a representative of German science at the European level

- The DFG enters into dialogue with the European member states and the European Parliament to contribute to the development of European research policy (such as the legal framework for operating research infrastructure, research visas, earmarking of funds from the European Structural Fund for research, etc.).
- The DFG exerts influence on the European Commission in the development of the framework programme and the associated funding programmes, which are intended to promote international research collaboration, foster young researchers and strengthen European research infrastructure.
- The DFG supports the development of the ERC as a science-driven Europe-wide funding organisation for basic research (as part of FP7).
- The DFG supports the expansion of the ERC as a supranational partner organisation because it holds excellence to be the sole funding criterion and because it is committed to an independent and transparent peer review process.

2. The European Research Area from the DFG's Perspective

In 2000 the member states of the EU passed the Lisbon Agenda. The aim of this agenda was, and is, to make the EU the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. The creation of a single ERA takes top priority for the European heads of state and government in attaining this ambitious goal. Excellent science and research are a precondition for innovation and economic prosperity in Europe.

The ERA concept provides the DFG's funding activities at a European level with a new dynamism and German research with new impetus. The DFG therefore supports the political concept behind the ERA and is actively involved in its design.

What are the DFG's objectives in shaping the ERA?

From the European Commission's point of view, one of the main objectives of the ERA is to overcome the fragmented nature of the European research landscape. The DFG sees fragmentation as a challenge that stems from European diversity. This challenge must be answered effectively if researchers are to enjoy full and fruitful mobility.¹

Fragmentation must be sufficiently overcome so that a "critical mass" is attained, and bilateral and multi-lateral synergies are optimised along with international competition. Under these conditions the ERA will propel Europe into the forefront of global science.

Diversity is one of Europe's most significant strengths and a source of great potential. Fragmentation, therefore, must not be overcome at the price of those productive features that allow national funding organisations to respond with speed and flexibility to topical developments.

The ERA enjoys notable advantages in recruiting the best researchers and scientists, in addition to the appeal of key locations and in its potential for a highly efficient research environment. It will be necessary, therefore, to strike the right balance between centralised coordination by the European Commission (primarily through FP7) and the decentralised, purely research-led work of the national research (funding) organisations.

¹ The DFG has a direct impact on mobility by way of the "Money Follows Researcher" instrument. As far as other hurdles to mobility are concerned (university appointment procedures, employment and working conditions, portability of social security benefits, etc.), the DFG is only able to have an indirect effect.



3. The ESF's Role in the European Research Area

As a science-driven organisation, the ESF has an important role to play in augmenting European research policy and funding activities. The ESF should consolidate its position as the “voice of science in Europe” with respect to political players and the ERC. This function is especially important for those countries that lack a self-governed research funding organisation that is both independent and internationally active (such as exists in Germany). The ESF guarantees researchers in these countries a politically independent and purely scientific assessment, as well as high-quality peer review of research cooperation within Europe. For such ventures the ESF provides a crucial liaison and coordination service and can thus assist in implementing research-led standards and a harmonised Europe-wide peer review and decision-making process.²

3.1 The ESF's programme portfolio

In 2002 the ESF began soliciting proposals for the European Collaborative Research Programmes (EUROCORES) scheme. This scheme is the only European interdisciplinary coordinated funding programme operating on a multilateral level within the ERA, similar to the DFG's Priority Programmes. The number of proposals submitted in the framework of this programme has remained high ever since 2005 (when proposals were first solicited from all scientific areas).³ Following a rigorous review process carried out by the ESF, and subsequent assessment by the DFG, an average of approx. €1.5 million is contributed to each EUROCORES programme by the DFG.⁴

On the basis of the evaluation report by the EUROCORES Scheme Review Panel and its approval by the ESF Governing Council in September 2007, the DFG supports the idea of enabling the ESF to finance individual projects of upcoming EUROCORES programmes – in the medium term – via a “common pot” funding mechanism.

² In parallel to the Lead Agency procedure (for details on the Lead Agency procedure, see section 5); this section applies only to the ESF's own procedures

³ A total of 53 proposals were received in 2005, 47 in 2006, 33 in 2007 and 38 in 2008.

⁴ The number of individual projects per topic is typically 20 to 30.

This administrative change would create an opportunity for the ESF to directly fund those individual projects that have been selected by the respective multilateral ESF EUROCORES panel. The DFG believes that the credibility of the ESF's advisory function in policy matters can only work on the basis of transparent, direct and reliable funding allocation, as directed by the ESF and founded on the quality assurance provided by its members. The DFG plans to address the issue of common-pot funding by the ESF as soon as possible in order to be able to keep to the originally envisaged implementation deadline of five years.⁵

The DFG believes consideration should be given to balancing topical EUROCORES programmes with broad, coordinated, non-topical research programmes. This change would contribute to greater flexibility of European research funding.⁶

The networking instruments such as "Forward Looks" and "Research Networking Programmes" are important elements of the ESF's programme portfolio because they provide a pathway that could ultimately lead to proposals for the establishment of funding themes, given successful researcher networking.

The activities of COST, an intergovernmental networking agency, will be evaluated to identify possible programme redundancy to the ESF portfolio and subsequently amended if necessary. Since the administration and drain of the COST funds (currently part of FP7) is guaranteed by the ESF head office, the ESF's member organisations should play an expanded role in this process. The DFG is open to dialogue on ways of solving this issue.

The DFG supports the involvement of non-European funding organisations (such as the National Science Foundation) in ESF programmes, especially in EUROCORES. It will continue its participation in the debate regarding the prospects for collaboration between the ESF and any other potential sources of funding (such as the European Commission). The DFG will maintain its position that, fundamentally, all ESF activities should be initiated by the scientific community or one of the ESF's member organisations. Such a strategy helps to preserve the ESF's role as a research-led organisation for research (funding) bodies in Europe.

5 The evaluation report by the EUROCORES Scheme Evaluation Panel was presented to the Joint Committee at its session on 03/03/2007 and the findings were reported. The ESF is currently working on developing new funding mechanisms that will replace the "à la carte" model.

6 An example of topically independent funding is the ECRP (European Collaborative Research Projects in the Social Sciences) programme, which has so far been limited to the social sciences.

3.2 Interaction between the DFG and the ESF: Problematic areas and prospects

A number of insights have been gained from the intensive collaboration between the ESF and its members, relating in particular to the following issues:

- The 80 member organisations of the ESF (academies, funding organisations and performing agencies) experience a high degree of managerial and worker turnover. This hinders the relationship between ESF management and representatives of member organisations by encouraging redundancy in dialogue on strategic goals and the fine tuning of the ESF's programme portfolio – in the Governing Council, for instance.
- This, and the disparity in programmes offered by the ESF's members, can also occasionally lead to long and drawn-out decision-making processes. The Governing Council, Science Advisory Board and Standing Committees should strive to collaborate more closely and efficiently in the future.
- The Standing Committees, as representatives of the scientific community, are unwieldy.⁷ They are not adequately involved in strategic decisions made by the ESF, although the installation of committee chairs on the Science Advisory Board in 2006 was a useful step towards closer cooperation with the ESF's executive committees.

The DFG will continue to monitor the development of the ESF critically and constructively in order to enhance the ESF's position as an important player in the ERA. The DFG recognises the progress made by the ESF, especially since 2004, in its efforts to develop a programme portfolio that is appealing to the scientific community, an efficient management structure and an even closer accord with its member organisations.

⁷ Each country that is a member has at least one representative on each standing committee.



4. The DFG and the ERC in Europe

The DFG has supported the establishment of the ERC from the outset. The ERC's commitment to a science-driven competitive funding system was not only a prerequisite to, but also a result of the DFG's endorsement. The DFG supports the ERC for two main reasons: first, in order to increase competition among both European researchers and research sites and expand funding opportunities for researchers in Germany; second, because the ERC is a suitable instrument for developing international peer review as well as high-quality evaluation and funding standards throughout Europe. The DFG will continue to be actively involved in the development of the ERC, both in terms of its programme portfolio and its administrative structure (executive agency).

The DFG offers a broad funding portfolio catering to the specific needs of researchers of all ages and levels of experience, starting from young scientists through to large research networks. As a national funding organisation, the DFG's strength derives from the close integration of its statutory bodies and its head office with the scientific communities. Its knowledge of these communities is intimate, enabling the DFG to provide in-depth advice and continuous support that meets the needs of the researchers and research institutions. In addition the DFG is able to identify emerging needs for research funding quickly and to adjust its funding instruments in a flexible manner.

The DFG represents a type of politically independent funding organisation that many other European countries do not have. This advantage needs to be reinforced and strengthened in the future, meaning that the DFG will have to retain its full portfolio, and may even need to expand it. This is precisely where the DFG's two-pronged objective becomes apparent: whilst cooperating with other national and European players in order to enable the ERC to play an important role within a common research area, the DFG will at the same time take advantage of its unique position in order to strengthen German science and research.

Although both organisations share the same objective – which is to support researchers solely on the basis of scientific excellence – the ERC and the DFG are not directly competing with each other. Rather, both organisations fulfil their specific roles which derive from complementary, though not interchangeable, objectives. Therefore, there is no need for any division of labour. The differences between the two institutions are not based on a simple allocation of target groups or funding programmes. Instead, they arise from each organisation's different scope, the ability of each to integrate the scientific communities, and the capacity of each to individually support scientists and provide continuous funding.

It would be improper to automatically construe existing or future programme overlap between the DFG and the ERC as poor coordination. Rather, functionally separated responsibilities taken by the ERC and the DFG should be understood as elements of a common ERA context. The fact that both organisations offer complementary programmes provides ideal conditions for researchers: it enables them to compete for additional European funding, which in turn strengthens the competitiveness of national research. ERC grants are a suitable instrument for supporting the internationalisation of research institutions. Scientists funded by an ERC grant benefit German research. They increase the visibility and attractiveness of German research facilities and can thus make a significant contribution towards the internationalisation of those institutions. Therefore, the DFG encourages outstanding scientists of all disciplines to apply for ERC grants in this international competition. The DFG and the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, as the joint National Contact Point, assist researchers and research institutions in their ERC applications by providing information and advice.

The DFG's role in the future development of the ERC

The development of the ERC includes, most importantly, the reorganisation of its structures as well as adaptation of its funding programmes. This applies in particular to the governance structure and the interaction between its Scientific Council, the Steering Committee of the Executive Agency and the ERC's head office.

As the largest independent funding organisation for basic research in Germany, the DFG represents all scientific communities and is the central funding body for university research. The DFG's role in helping to further develop the ERC should therefore be given even greater weight by the German government.⁸ Thus, the DFG will represent the interests of German university research before the European Commission, in consultation with the German Rectors' Conference, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research and other key players.

Its aims in doing so are the science-driven development of the ERC's programme portfolio, increased effectiveness of its peer review and funding procedures, as well as the enhancement of the ERC's administrative and legal structures.

⁸ An initial step in this direction is the common assumption of the responsibilities in the ERC's programmes committee by the DFG and the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

Promotion of German research to the European Commission and national governments requires consultation between European and national research organisations for the sake of a unified position (such as in the context of EUROHORCs and the ESF). Consequently, the ERC should also engage in such institutionalised dialogue with national and transnational partner organisations.



5. The DFG's European Research Activities at Present

Through the joint programmes it conducts with partner organisations in other European countries, both bilaterally and multilaterally, the DFG has developed international peer review and decision-making processes that adhere to the criteria of scientific excellence and are openly and internationally competitive. In spite of continuing disparities in funding portfolios of European research funding bodies such as the ERC, the DFG's national activities as well as the bilateral and multilateral activities conducted by the DFG and its partners will all continue to play decisive roles in the future development of the ERA.

For the DFG, bilateral and multilateral cooperation provides an opportunity to further optimise its own standards and promote them internationally. This two-pronged approach is necessary in the long term in order to allow the diversity needed to meet the specific needs of all parties involved based on an intimate knowledge of national research facilities. Funding organisations such as the ERC or the European Commission are unlikely to meet this need. The broad spectrum of bilateral and multilateral programmes that exists at present is the result of gradual bottom-up processes. It warrants consolidation and the identification of best-practice models.

A consolidation of the administration and peer review process of individual funding proposals has already taken place under the DACH scheme. With the signing of the agreement on the "Lead Agency" procedure, the parties have agreed to the unilateral administration and mutual recognition of peer reviews. In practical terms, this means that a bilateral or trilateral DACH project is only reviewed by a single funding organisation (the "lead agency"). All of the organisations involved have the opportunity to nominate their own peer reviewers, and the outcome of the peer review is submitted to the partner organisations as a funding recommendation. If the proposal is accepted, the researchers involved in the project are then financed by their own country's funding organisation. However, each organisation retains the right to reject the funding recommendation, although this can only be done by the highest relevant decision-making body. Its reasons are then communicated to the lead agency, which is free to respond.



II. Current Developments and Outlook

As the ERA continues to advance, the DFG will continually need to reposition itself at all three levels described above: as a funding organisation, as a partner in bilateral and multilateral networks and as an advocate of the interests of the German scientific community in Europe. This applies, in particular, to the latest conceptions of ERA and EU funding.

1. EUROHORCs and ESF Road Map

1.1 Background

In April 2007 the European Commission published a green paper outlining the future development of the ERA ("The European Research Area: New Perspectives"). This initiated a Europe-wide debate, in response to which EUROHORCs and the ESF drew up a joint statement containing the announcement of a road map that will help to implement an independent "ERA vision", reflecting the point of view of the research (funding) organisations.

1.2 What the Road Map contains

The Road Map was approved by the EUROHORCs General Assembly and the ESF Governing Council in April 2009. The Road Map specifies ten key areas of activity on which the member organisations are to concentrate over the next ten years at most. The DFG, for example, will be responsible for the transformation of the ERA into a "European Research Grant Union".

The conversion of the ERA into a European Research Grant Union aims to facilitate international research throughout Europe and ensure the highest level of mobility possible. This will involve further expansion of the EUROHORCs "Money Follows Researcher" instrument as well as the "Money Follows Cooperation" instrument, which has so far only been used under the DACH scheme in the form of a memorandum of understanding, encompassing all of the EUROHORCs partner organisations (2009). In addition, it is expected that the new lead agency procedure will also be extended to the whole of Europe under EUROHORCs following its trial period (2010). The ultimate vision is for research grants to be mutually recognised by all stakeholders so that they can be used in whichever country the research work is then actually done.



2. Current Developments in EU Research Policy

Since the ERA concept was first published in 2000, the EU's research policy has been increasingly focussed on the integration and coordination of research funding activities. This has been accompanied by a paradigm shift in the EU's research funding system. The European Commission now aims to outsource day-to-day operational tasks to independent bodies, while the Directorate-General for Research, as a "European Research Ministry", will concentrate on creating the right legal and political conditions for the ERA. Parallel to delegating the management of individual projects to project management organisations (such as executive agencies belonging to the ERC or for Marie Curie Actions), the Commission will coordinate national and European research investment, for example in European research infrastructure (ESFRI).

The Commission's current proposal for joint programming expands its responsibilities regarding coordinating existing, jointly funded programmes and initiating new joint ventures.

The Commission hopes that this initiative will continue to heighten the coordination of national funding programmes that began with ERA-NET. The main focus of joint programming is on scientific (and/or social) topics or challenges that exceed the research funding capacity of individual member states. The Commission hopes that member states will participate voluntarily and variously in defining and implementing research agendas in different areas. From the DFG's point of view it is important to work towards ensuring that the selection of the topics addressed and the management of joint programming take place according to a science-driven process.

The inclusion of the ERC in the Seventh EU Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development has opened up new and attractive funding opportunities for basic research at the European level, especially at universities. At the same time, inclusion of the ERC has firmly and fully established the principles of competition and excellence within FP7 for the first time.

Further intensification of European funding of basic research requires, on the one hand, an increase in the amount of funding available and, on the other hand, the structural development of the funding organisation responsible for allocating those funds (the ERC). The member states therefore need to strive to increase the ERC's budget in future negotiations concerning the financial framework of the EU after 2013. At the same time, the Seventh Framework Programme calls for evaluation of the ERC's structures (executive agency) and mechanisms (funding programmes). These evaluations should be used to help the ERC become a completely autonomous and purely science-driven funding organisation.

In developing future EU research funding programmes, the DFG deems it essential to concentrate on transferring responsibility for future expansion of basic research in Europe to research-led governance structures. The evaluation of the ERC may provide the necessary political momentum to establish basic research within the EU upon a secure foundation of scientific autonomy.



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