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## **Research Policies for Europe**

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Europe and with it the European research system are experiencing an unprecedented pace of social, environmental and technological change. The ongoing transition in the international division of labour from hands, tools, and machines to brains, computers, and laboratories as well as the increasing importance of electronic communication for international networking make it imperative for researchers, and policy-makers as well as for industry and politics to enter into a process of assessing strengths and weaknesses, reviewing funding modes and institutional structures, and subsequently adapt to the changing environment of knowledge production.

Today's knowledge-based society needs to foster and fund transformative research. Without major breakthroughs in basic research many of our problems – current and future – cannot be solved. The European Union (EU) – though still the world's largest "producer" of graduates, PhDs, and scientific publications – has long been losing ground in the field of basic breakthroughs. Fifty years ago, European scientists dominated the lists of the Nobel Prize awardees and of other prestigious prizes as well. Today, Nobel Prizes and similarly renowned awards are mainly won by scientists working in the US.

Apart from a few research areas such as astrophysics, space research, nuclear physics and, to a limited extent, molecular biology, Europe suffered from an almost total lack of transnational support of basic and strategic research. European research still needs institutional reforms at all levels to keep pace with the rapid changes inherent in becoming a knowledge-based economy. It is increasingly desirable, even urgent, to establish strong pan-European funding structures capable of creating both a cooperative climate for development of new ideas, and an institutional environment to produce more cutting-edge results through enhanced competition among the best researchers throughout Europe.

This rationale was behind the establishment of the Euroscience Association for the Advancement of Science as well as the European Research Council (ERC). The debates about creating a European voice of scholarship and science as well as the need for creating a basic research funding institution can be traced back well into the 1970s and the subsequent establishment of the European Science Foundation (ESF). They were revived by some institutions such as the German Wissenschaftsrat in the early 1990s, but it was not until the early days of this century that the idea of creating an ERC turned into a powerful vision which ultimately made the European Council of Ministers and the European Commission to deal with the recommendations prepared by numerous experts and institutions.

Various committees and conferences paved the way for an agreement not only among and between researchers, politicians, and administrators, but also across research associations and organisations. Crucial in this process of establishing the

ERC were not just scholars and scientists, but also chief executives of European foundations, in particular colleagues from Sweden such as Michael Sohlman, Chief Executive of the Nobel Foundation, and Professor Dan Brändström, the then Director of the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation. They not only organised several fora for discussing the perspectives of an ERC, but they were also involved in preparing some of the reports.

The ERC finally launched in 2007, is a radical departure from conventional methods for implementing EU research programmes. It is the first European funding body set up to support investigator-driven frontier research. The 2009 “Review of the European Research Council Structures and Mechanisms” by an expert group chaired by Professor Vaira Vike-Freiberga has shown that there are still some obstacles to overcome on the way towards an autonomous, efficient, and effective transnational research funding organisation, but also that an important step has been taken towards re-structuring research funding on a European scale.

Private Foundations have played a crucial role in preparing for this step. They also take an important part in the process of innovating research funding in Europe. Obviously, it is not the overall amount of money spent, but rather the approach taken by foundations that makes the difference. Their autonomy, alertness, and flexibility enable them to operate effectively as facilitators of change, to establish islands of success, and thereby also to achieve considerable impact on policy-, and decision-makers. By fostering risky projects, encouraging networking across disciplinary, institutional, and national borders, and by helping some of the most creative researchers to break new grounds, foundations are able to prove that even on a European scale small things matter.

Due to the fact that almost everywhere in Europe citizens are used to carrying a high tax load, we still expect governments to fully cover the costs of our universities and research institutes. All too often this coincides with tight regulatory regimes of managerial accountability and quite disproportionate government control. This will have to come to an end. The global competition for the most talented young people can only be won if we change paradigms quickly. No doubt, our universities must become more efficient, but in order to achieve that they must be given real autonomy and the freedom to establish optimal structures for the institution as such, and last but not least for their staff. Foundations can and should support them in this endeavour.

The power and the resources of foundations are of course limited. The intellectual lighthouses, or perhaps also the islands of hope and success foundations can help to create will only achieve wider impacts if foundations link up with partners, convince decision-makers that changes are feasible, and engage in advocacy and strategic alliances. The FOREMAP (Foundations research and mapping) initiative is an important step towards helping foundations to find new partners, collaborate on a European level, and thus achieve higher impact with their support for international research.

In addition to our efforts to foster and strengthen higher education and research in Europe we have to take a wider perspective and acknowledge that there can be no such thing as national, or European research in the regional sense of the term. Research is international by definition. For one thing, scholarly concerns do not end at national borders. In fact, rather the opposite is the case: many research areas deal with topics that have emerged in a global context. If we take a closer look at the role of European higher education and research in the world of learning, we quickly realize that we have not only lost a lot of ground over the past decades, but that we have also not been taking our responsibilities seriously. In the case of the developing world we have strong reasons to be ashamed of our inability to find appropriate solutions. Of course, foundations alone cannot and indeed should not pretend to be able to solve the problems of the developing world. The grand challenges involved must be addressed at the G8-, and UN level. But again foundations can help to encourage those who are willing to bring about change and embrace Heraclitus' dictum that "Nothing is permanent except change".