European Research, 10 Years On

NEXT WEEK, BARCELONA WILL HOST THE EUROSCIENCE OPEN FORUM, EUROPE’S MAJOR interdisciplinary meeting, to discuss the latest trends in science, technology, the humanities, and policy. Euroscience, the founding organization of this meeting, was born more than 10 years ago, at a time when there was much debate on the need for new research structures and the desire to establish a common research “space” across Europe. In 2000, the European Union (EU) launched the European Research Area (ERA), a concept that aims to increase the impact of research efforts by strengthening the coherence of research activities and policies in Europe. In 2007, the EU launched the European Research Council (ERC), the first pan-European funding structure for frontier research in all fields of knowledge. So, is European science better off now than 10 years ago? The answer contains both good news and bad news.

Creating the ERA was an excellent idea, but we must remind ourselves that it is a work in progress. Many of its objectives have not been accomplished. For instance, investment in terms of percent of gross domestic product has remained flat for the last decade at around 1.8 to 1.9% (the goal is 3% for 2010). Although the ERA is theoretically the sum of 27 national programs, most member states have not delivered as far as restructuring their own systems to coordinate with a broader European network, dealing with inflexible academic structures, and addressing insufficient research funding.

The ERA Green Paper of 2007 only confirms this view. It appears to tackle some of the main issues: “good framework conditions for research, well trained and mobile researchers, excellent research institutions and research infrastructures, as well as an efficient exchange of knowledge between public research and industry.” However, the Green Paper would have had more impact had it addressed the fundamental issues underlying the actual development of the ERA. For instance, its broad conclusion that EU funds aimed at structure and cohesion should increasingly aim at innovation and research simply restates what was said at ERA’s inception. Statements like this will get us nowhere. We need action—a specific road map on how to achieve this lofty goal.

With or without a Green Paper, EU research ministers have shown on several occasions that they know where the problems are. The European Commission has the Framework Programme as its main mechanism to achieve Europe’s research objectives. But when compared with the total public resources for research in Europe, it represents marginal (though very influential) funding. Therefore, the member states must act. The problem lies largely with them and not necessarily with the Commission. A European vision of a common research space continues to be an intimidating concept for some member states, who consider such notions a threat to their national sovereignty. Unfortunately, acting means providing resources and giving up some national hobbyhorses, and this is where we get stuck.

There is cause for optimism, however. The ERC can be qualified as a great success. It is the first model of its kind to be tried at a European level, and it has already accomplished one of its key goals of investing in, and raising the profile of, young researchers. It also has established good procedures for tying funding to research excellence. Interestingly, its formation was forced upon both the EC and member states by a bottom-up movement. The engagement of several institutions, such as the European Science Foundation and Euroscience, and the quality of the project, left the EU with few arguments to turn it down. Science will profit from the ERC, whose budget is projected to grow to several billion euros within the next few years.

The future of European research lies precisely in a European vision. Bottom-up success stories like the ERC are an encouraging sign that we are slowly moving in the right direction. But more than ever, it is the member states who will decide the course we run. It is time they showed courage and act as Europeans, united.

– Enric Banda