

# **European Research Council 5th Anniversary Event**

**29 February 2012**

## **Keynote Address by Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn**

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted and proud to be here this evening to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the European Research Council – one of Europe's biggest success stories in the world of research.

This event marks the fact that the ERC has truly "come of age" as a world class funding organisation for frontier research.

Today you have heard President Barroso's praise of the ERC and the inspiring words of the ERC President, Professor Nowotny. We have had an illuminating debate in which voices from all corners of the globe were heard and we have been taken through the short but intense history of the ERC in the most entertaining and enlightening way by the people who know the organisation from the inside and from its very beginnings. What's more, this evening we have witnessed a

cavalcade of fascinating research demonstrated by ERC grantees in a splendidly colourful way.

After only five years, the ERC can point to a remarkable list of achievements:

- over 31,000 proposals submitted to the ERC's competitions;
- more than 2,500 top-notch grant holders funded;
- representing 53 different nationalities;
- based in some 480 different institutions in 27 different countries;
- and with over 10,000 young researchers employed in their teams.
- In addition, the ERC counts 4 Nobel laureates and 3 Fields Medallists among its grantees, as well as the winners of 30 more internationally recognised prizes;
- And so far over 3400 articles acknowledging ERC funding have appeared in peer-reviewed high-impact journals. Indeed, in the course of 2011, every week at least one ERC-funded project reported its findings in either Nature or Science!

And all this from an organisation that only moved into its own offices a few years ago. I am very proud of these achievements, and I am sure that the ERC is too. But, given the fact that none of the ERC's five-year projects has yet been completed, I am sure that even better things are still to come!

This is why we can already call the ERC a huge success. And it helps to explain the remarkable support that the ERC attracts from across the scientific community.

But still some people have certain doubts. They tell me: *that's all very nice but in times of economic crisis we need results now!*

Yes, we are in a crisis. Some say it is the worst economic crisis for 60 years. But, fundamentally, what we are facing now is a growth crisis. And we will never get out of it unless we can create highly skilled, high-paying jobs in new sectors.

That's why our growth strategy - Europe 2020 - is so vital. Europe needs to be at the forefront in emerging scientific

areas to cope with unprecedented challenges, and to take advantage of the economic opportunities these challenges will present. This is where we must look to our scientists. In an increasingly globalised and competitive research landscape, only genuinely world class excellence can cut it, and we in Europe need more of it. Fundamental research is fundamental to innovation, fundamental to growth and fundamental to economic success.

People also sometimes say to me: *this is all very good, but you are just funding the same old institutions*. But US public-sector researchers have, on average, twice the resources of EU public-sector researchers and are three times more productive in terms of the number and quality of publications<sup>1</sup>. Amazingly, Harvard University alone spends more per year on research than the total research expenditure (public and private) in nine of the EU's Member States!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> IU Competitiveness Report 2011 page I-151.

<sup>2</sup> MS Gross Domestic Expenditure on R&D GERD from Science, Technology and Competitiveness key figures report 2008/2009 page 21 and Harvard University Financial Report Fiscal year 2011.

So, not only is it natural that the ERC is funding researchers at some of Europe's top research institutions. It is also necessary, so that they can begin to compete with their global rivals. And at the same time that half of ERC funding has gone to the top institutions, the other half has gone to over 400 other institutions across Europe. Some institutions have received a single ERC grant. That says to me that the European Research Council can find and reward excellence wherever it may be.

So when people say to me: *"the ERC would be great if only it gave a few more grants to my country"*. I answer: can you, hand on heart, say that you provide all the conditions for excellence? Is research funding always allocated competitively? Are positions always filled on merit? Are scientific careers fully open to female talent? Are pay and career structures attractive enough?

Through the ERC, Europe's top researchers are for the first time competing on a level playing field. And that, precisely, is the EU added-value. So the results of the ERC's calls help to show, on a European scale, where excellence can be found now, and where improvement is

necessary. The situation is dynamic and sets a benchmark. Ambitious individuals, institutions, regions and countries can seize the initiative and we will fully support these efforts with very generous funding from the structural funds.

Finally let us not forget that science is collective, public and international. If CERN confirms the existence of the Higgs Boson, nobody would complain that this benefits only France and Switzerland. That would be absurd. Why is it any different for any discovery made by an ERC grantee? The benefits of ERC funding therefore go far beyond the researchers who get the ERC's grants or the institutions that host them.

I have had the chance to meet many ERC grantees and I'm struck over and over by their creativity and curiosity, their excellence and their inspirational ambition in science. Each time it makes me proud that the EU has funded them - both the rising stars and those with stellar track-records already.

And it is for all these reasons that I pushed so hard to have a very significant boost in resources for the ERC in the new Horizon 2020 programme. And that is why I'm still happy to say that I am the ERC's biggest fan.

I would like to warmly congratulate and thank the ERC's independent Scientific Council, all the ERC's founding fathers (including my colleague Janez Potočnik who is with us this evening) and the staff of the ERC's Executive Agency alike, for making the ERC happen, and for making it such a success. I am sure this is only the start and that the coming five years and beyond will be just as prosperous for the ERC!

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you an enjoyable evening and an excellent event tomorrow.

Thank you.