

Interview

“Good Science Unites Us”

Questions for the future secretary general of the ERC, Professor Dr Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker

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Professor Dr. Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker

What is it about this position that particularly appeals to you?

Not only is this position new, the entire ERC institution is as well. This is a once in a lifetime chance, and I will therefore try to do my best. But it is also unique for the situation of basic research in Europe. How long have so many of us worked towards the foundation of the ERC! Expectations are high. I am confident that they can be met, and that all those involved will pull together - the Scientific Council, the European Commission, national governments and the European Parliament.

What is your top priority over the coming months?

Basically everything needs to happen at once - the establishment of an efficient secretariat, the first call for proposals for the ‘starting grants’, drawing up the ex-

pert panels, in short, the establishment of an institution that will gain the trust of the European scientific community in the shortest possible time and without making too many mistakes.

I trust that this is possible, because despite all the cultural diversity in Europe, good science unites us all. This will ensure that politics is kept out of our work. The secretary general has to bear this in mind as well.

How will the work be divided up between the secretary general, the Scientific Council and the Executive Agency?

To a certain extent, the structure of the ERC follows that of American businesses. A strong advisory board - the Scientific Council - will develop ideas that will then have to be implemented by an executive or management board. The secretary general will assume a key role on this board, when applicable, to find funding and the means to empower the secretariat as well as to relay his experience to the Scientific Council. As always in life, this will depend on the personal interaction of those involved. Last but not least, the secretary general will need to ensure that the proper chemistry is there.

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Editorial

Dear reader,

With the appointment of Professor Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker as secretary general of the European Research Council (ERC) on 30 August 2006, the next important step towards the start of the European Research Council has been taken. From 1 January 2007, the current President of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft will, together with the President of the Scientific Council (SC), Professor Fotis Kafatos, and the Director of the ERC’s agency, Dr Jack Metthey, determine the future course of the ERC.

Later, Professor Winnacker will be followed by the Spanish economist and former Catalan minister, Professor Andreu Mass-Colell, who will head up the organisation until the end of 2011.

The appointment of the renowned German scientist Winnacker is a clear political signal: basic research in Europe should only be funded on the basis of its scientific quality.

Here politics and science should work together in such a way that research gets the freedom it needs to thrive – the ERC wants to exclusively fund excellent basic research at a European level.

The first call for proposals which relate to the starting independent researcher grants will be made at the beginning of next year.

KoWi is already providing advice to you and your institution about this!

Dr Annette Doll-Sellen
Director of KoWi

Interview continued

with
Professor Dr Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker

What impulses will the ERC give basic research in Europe?

Basic research is always under pressure, as it forms an essential, but not always visible, link in the innovation chain. It is all about jobs, but when and where basic research contributes to them is never certain. The foundation of the ERC is not only a signal to European society that the development of civil society without basic research would be unthinkable - it also emphasises the cultural significance of science for this continent in its own right. The crucial building blocks for the development of science were laid down in Europe, so it now goes without saying that Europe wants to resume this leading role again.

What will be the role of the humanities?

The ERC is open to applications and applicants from all disciplines, including the humanities and social sciences. My experience from the DFG is that applicants in the humanities and social sciences, for example in schemes for young scientists such as the Emmy-Noether programme, have been just as successful as applicants from other disciplines. I very much hope that humanities researchers will be just as self-confident and committed to identifying with the ERC as others are. If unity in science still exists, then it is surely to be found in basic research.

How will the ERC and national funding organisations work together?

That is an interesting question, as there are hardly any comparable cases in the world. In the USA, funding is essentially national - through the NSF, the NIH and

various ministries in Washington, but for example, there is no separate NSF for California or for Massachusetts.

In Europe, national organisations have around 20 billion euros a year at their disposal, the ERC will "only" have one billion. Therefore, the ERC must work hard to ensure that it leaves a lasting and measurable impact. This is best achieved through the implementation of programmes that national systems are not able to put in place, such as the funding streams the Scientific Council is now proposing. Some countries do of course support their young researchers well, however the majority do not. The ERC needs a successful start if it is to do justice to these and other issues.

Here it would be advisable to secure the support of national funding organisations, either for the selection of experts or in the appointment of qualified personnel.

Are you looking forward to Brussels as a city?

Of course I wonder about Brussels. Unfortunately, I still don't know the city well enough. You go there in the morning and leave again in the evening, a bit of chocolate, but nothing more. My wife and I are looking forward to the international flair and to the surroundings - Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges. Brussels is the eighth location of my career, after Zürich, Berkeley, Stockholm, Boston, Cologne, Munich and Bonn. What will number nine be?

Further information is available at:

<http://erc.europa.eu>

Biography

Professor Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker, born in Frankfurt-am-Main in **1941**, studied chemistry at the ETH Zürich, where he also did his PhD. He then undertook research in Berkeley and Stockholm, and later became a DFG visiting professor at the Institute for Genetics at the University of Cologne.

In **1977** Winnacker went to Munich's Ludwig-Maximilian University, where in **1980** he took up a chair in biochemistry.

From **1984 to 1997**, he led the Molecular Biology Laboratory, the "Gene Centre" of the University of Munich.

From **1987 until 1993** he has been a Vice President of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. Since **1998**, he has been their President.

From 1 January **2007**, Winnacker heads to Brussels as secretary general of the ERC and will remain in office until June **2009**.

The biochemist is a member of numerous scientific societies and councils; between **2000 and 2003** he belonged to the National Ethics Council; from **2003 to 2004** he was chairman of the European Heads of Research Councils (EUROHORCS).

Main Research Fields

- Virus/cell interactions
- Mechanisms of gene expression in higher cells
- Prion diseases (including BSE)

Major publications

- From Genes to Clones, VCh Weinheim (1984)
- Am Faden des Lebens, Piper Verlag, München (1993)
- Viren, Die heimlichen Herrscher, Eichborn Verlag, Frankfurt (1999)
- Das Genom, Eichborn Verlag, Frankfurt (2002), updated and expanded new edition

Statements

An Outstanding Choice

**Professor Dr Jürgen Mlynek,
President of the Helmholtz Society**

“Professor Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker is an outstanding choice for the position of secretary general of the European Research Council (ERC). I am pleased about this both in a personal capacity and as President of the Helmholtz Society, as Winnacker’s appointment also means that basic research will receive the attention it urgently needs. He is a well-known and very experienced international research manager, who has introduced new developments in the DFG, for example in support for young researchers, and the Excellence Initiative. Winnacker has also successfully worked to make research politics more European and more international. I am sure that he will also leave his lasting mark on the future of the European research area.”

**Professor Dr Hans Schöler,
Director of the Max Planck Institute
for Molecular Biomedicine
in Münster**

“My first meeting with Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker was marked by an enthusiasm for genetic regulation. The subjects have changed over the years, but whether as, at that time, a young doctoral student, as a lab leader or later as institute director, the fascination has remained. It is his intense attention, perhaps interspersed with questions, followed by his helpful conclusion. His head slightly tilted, an occasional barely discernable nod, and you know you have his full attention. These are just some of the skills that I have always praised him for. Europe and also Germany should consider themselves fortunate to have such a scientist – but also such a person – as the secretary general of the ERC.”

Interview

Three Questions to

**Professor Dr Hajo Freund,
Member of the ERC Scientific Council**

Is the large number of excellent candidates who applied for the post of ERC secretary general already a reflection of the success of the ERC?

I think it is a sign that the scientific community has major expectations of the ERC and for this reason found a series of high-calibre applicants, who were ready to play a part in this development.

Another milestone has been reached with the selection of the secretary general. What is still on the Scientific Council’s agenda before the official start of the ERC in January 2007?

An important step is setting up panels of experts and involving excellent scientists in the peer review procedure. In my view, this is the key to the success of the whole initiative.

The secretary general should have a key role in the strategic organisation of the ERC. What will this look like?

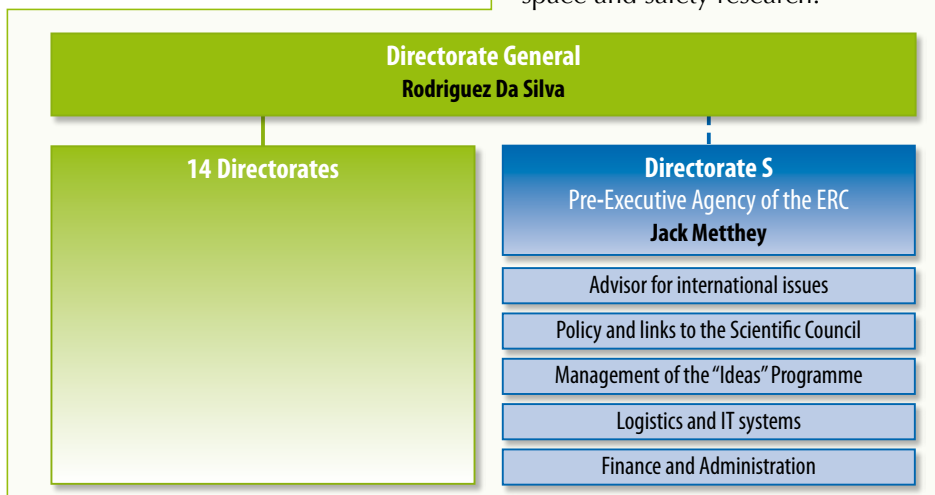
The secretary general will work closely with the presidency and the whole scientific council, with further relevant strategies to be drawn up.

Info

Funding of European Basic Research

The Scientific Council (SC) of the European Research Council (ERC) will base its concept of how basic research should be funded at a European level on an executive agency. The agency, which we would describe in Germany as a secretariat, will support the SC in the administration of the “Ideas” Specific Programme in the Seventh Framework Programme. The ERC’s agency will be led by Dr Jack Metthey, a French national, from 1 October 2006.

Metthey received his scientific education in California and Strasbourg, where he gained his PhD in biology in 1977. After several years in science, Metthey switched to industry as a software developer and IT consultant. He became a member of the European Commission in 1988 with the First Framework Programme. Quickly, he rose to become an assistant to the director general and finally to head of department in DG Information Society. As an advisor, Metthey played a key role in the establishment of the Fifth Framework Programme. Since 1998, he has, as director of the transport directorate, been responsible for aerospace and space and safety research.



Impulse for Interdisciplinary Research

Interview with Professor Dr Christoph Marksches, President of Berlin's Humboldt University

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Professor Dr. Christoph Marksches

What does the appointment of Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker as Secretary General of the ERC mean to you as a scientist and research manager?

I regard my colleague Winnacker as an extremely thorough, highly engaged scientist and research manager. He has a major sensitivity and feel for the humanities and for

high-quality research in this area that few other natural scientists have to such a degree. His appointment is in this respect a major stroke of luck for European research.

What support for the humanities does the theologist Marksches hope to see?

In Munich, Winnacker has considered, for example, forming a working group with theologists to discuss and debate questions arising from genetic technology. I also hope to see a lot of effort from a scientist, already very familiar with research in many areas of the humanities and very interested in others, to bring the humanities into relevant interdisciplinary

projects with the natural sciences – not only in ethics, but for example also to look at results arising from neurology and evolutionary biology.

Where are there new opportunities for German universities to compete for EU funding?

Interdisciplinary research, such as the implication of evolutionary theory for the history of science, is, at least in its early stage, always hard to fund, and is burdened with many problems; there are however notable projects at the highest level in Germany. The competition for ERC research funding could strengthen such research at universities. It also makes an indispensable contribution to the cohesion of a university's various major science areas.

Which new funding instruments must the ERC offer for basic research?

Small-scale funding measures as well if possible. The humanities are most likely to be pushed into somewhat megalomaniac national schemes with many participants. That is not suitable for all subjects. Finally, money from the ERC should also be allocated to high-risk areas and for promising research, especially in the humanities. There is a distinct lacking of courageous risk taking at the national funding level.

A Brilliant Answer

Professor Dr Matthias Kleiner, President-designate of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

"I am pleased that the DFG's work has been acknowledged through the appointment of Professor Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker as the first secretary general of the European Research Council (ERC). The experiences of the long-serving DFG-President can thus find a way in to European research politics. The full-time secretary general comes to the key role at the creation and strategic establishment of the ERC. The establishment of the ERC in the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme as an independent, science-led organisation to fund basic research in Europe is an important step for science. Competition between the best brains for research funding based solely on the criterion of scientific excellence is a concept with which the DFG has long worked successfully."

Professor Dr Dr h.c. Ernst Theodor Rietschel, President of the Leibniz Association

"When someone wants to do good for science, what can be better than building up a new, international funding body that will benefit all those in the service of science? And who, through the combination of his own scientific excellence, experience of international research policy, and organisational knowledge of research funding would be predestined to lend successful impetus to this new body? I know that with the ERC Europe has found a brilliant answer to the first question. When I learned that Mr Winnacker was to become the first secretary general of the ERC, I then knew that the ERC had found a brilliant answer to the second question. I am extraordinarily pleased, and both personally and on behalf of the Leibniz Association wish Mr Winnacker much success in his new post."