

Different perspectives

My move last year from EMBO and 'Europe' to Science Foundation Ireland was an instructive and interesting experience for several reasons. Most notably, I became aware that the perspectives that are dominant in one arena are not necessarily the orthodoxy in another. At an organization such as EMBO, the European context for funding and organizing science inevitably dominates regional or national interests, whereas in an Irish funding agency, not surprisingly, the focus is on strengthening national research. Such different perspectives and divergent interests are legitimate and extend beyond the funding of science into the wider realm of politics, which, in turn, influences research at both a national and an international level.

The definition of the exact role of 'Brussels'—the agencies and institutions of the European Union—is the main topic of a long-running debate about the future of Europe. There are those who seek to unite Europe as a single republic with a stronger central government—similar to the French model—and those who see the future of Europe as a federation of entities with more individual autonomy—comparable with the German federal republic. Ironically, some of the 'republican' countries are more likely to reject greater centralization of power within the European Community and claim that 'Brussels' is trying to achieve a super-state status by stealth and osmosis.

The question of how Europe is organized is naturally relevant to scientists because it will affect how research and development are funded at the European level. The European Research Area (ERA) concept is now well into its third incarnation and the idea has much merit and logic to it, particularly to the increasingly globalized world of science. Nonetheless, the demand for *juste retour*—that every country should get back roughly what it gives to the union—haunts the further evolution of the ERA and gives rise to repeated demands for special treatment.

By contrast, the European Research Council (ERC) was created on the premise that the scientific quality of a research proposal would be the only criterion for success—not geography, financial contributions to Europe or other factors. The scientific board of the ERC has stuck to this principle admirably, but many observers anticipate that if most of the ERC grants continue to go to a few countries, those who argue that the EU—and by extension the ERC—has a duty to support research in all regions at a comparable level will be galvanized into lobbying action. In fact, the ERC is often seen as the exception rather than the rule; I suspect that beneath reiterations of the 'quality as the only criterion' mantra, there lurks in many national ministries a wariness of transferring too much control, independence and money to a central entity such as the ERC. It is therefore not surprising that ministers argue that investments into research should first stimulate their national economies. This primacy of local politics is known as 'pork barrel' in the USA and it has the same effect there: local interests take precedence over more noble, quality-driven assessments of ways to spend the budget. But legislators in Brussels, just as in Washington DC, can fail to understand or even respect these national sentiments—they are not exposed to the divergent views in the various regions, and this naturally leads to tension.

Different perspectives are also relevant within individual countries because the way in which money is spent on research is either questioned or applauded, depending on the interests and background of the analyst. Those working at universities or research institutions generally believe that the funding programmes should be based on investigator-driven proposals with the idea that the generation of knowledge is a noble goal in itself. Others believe that this is an indulgence with too high a price: they emphasize that taxpayers deserve a fair return on their investment and want scientists to focus on directly applicable research that gives

more value for money. This mismatch in perceptions is not necessarily a problem if the economy is on an upswing and if there is plenty of money to spend. However, if a country's economic growth stalls and tax income dwindles, those who argue that knowledge itself is not a sufficient result of massive investment will inevitably become more influential.

Of course, there are good examples of the advances and innovations that have arisen from research driven purely by scientific curiosity, but each of these is likely to be countered by the riposte that there are also legions of failures—in the sense that they had no application—which cannot justify a few successes. Even within the academic world, the perception of science as a worthwhile goal in itself is beginning to change: those who work on topics with potential technological applications sometimes speak dismissively of colleagues who just want to investigate and understand an interesting phenomenon. If funds become tight, the pro-application voices are likely to become louder and find external support.

The lesson to learn is that we should not take for granted that ours is the only way to think, just because most of the people we work with think in the same way. For me, it was rewarding to experience new perspectives when I moved from EMBO to Science Foundation Ireland. It made me realize that we should be more aware of other people's interests and ideas, and that we certainly—and fortunately—do not live in a monocultural environment. Understanding the full spectrum of opinions and points of view is not only enriching, but also the best preparation for success when times are changing.

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