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# A new calling

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The European Science Foundation is optimistic that narrowing its remit could lead to bigger and better things. Alexander Hellemans reports.

By Alexander Hellemans



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At a ceremony last month, the Strasbourg-based European Science Foundation presented its 40-year record of activity to the Historical Archives of the European Union. Providing a resource for science historians, the handover symbolised the end of the ESF as a grant-giving agency and its beginnings as a dedicated organisation for research support across the European Research Area.

“Over the last four to five years, there has been a real re-alignment in focus and strategy of the ESF,” says Jean-Claude Worms, who was appointed ESF chief executive in May after more than two decades at the foundation.

The ESF was created in 1974 by national research councils across Europe as a funding agency for cross-border projects. At its peak, the foundation boasted more than 80 members, and distributed more than €50 million a year through programmes such as Eurocores, launched in 2003 to fund collaborative research across Europe. With this lengthy history, many researchers were surprised when, in 2011, member organisations called for the ESF to cease its funding activities.

The proposal grew out of growing discontent about a lack of influence of national funding agencies on EU policy, which was perceived to be at odds with the fact that they funded about 95 per cent of research in Europe. One proposal was to merge the ESF with EuroHORCS, the association of the heads of national research councils, and focus on developing and promoting research policy. Others called to close down both EuroHORCS and the ESF and start a new organisation for science policy in Brussels.

Peter Tindemans, secretary-general of Euroscience, remembers one general meeting of the ESF assembly as the scene of a “palace revolution”, at which some members called for the dismantlement of the ESF. “These members did not achieve the two-thirds majority required,” he says. Instead, many discontinued their membership in protest.

The policy remit they sought was filled by Science Europe, which launched its Brussels office in 2011 with a small staff dedicated to lobbying for its 47 members. It has since been vocal on Framework programmes, funding for infrastructure and open access, among other issues.

The remaining ESF members approved its continuation as long as it wound down its traditional activities. “A long discussion ensued about a different remit, such as providing science services,” Worms says. “There was a recognised need for these services and we built a real business plan.”

But as yet, no organisation has sprung up to fill the gap left by the funding that the foundation used to provide. A final assessment of the foundation’s Eurocores programme, published in January, concluded that no instrument has adequately replaced Eurocores in promoting bottom-up, collaborative research. This is despite a myriad of cross-border funding instruments, including the Framework programme, joint programming and smaller initiatives such as ERA-Net projects.

And for the ESF, its membership going forward will be far smaller. It has just 13 member organisations at present, with representation from major countries such as Germany, the UK and the Netherlands notably absent.

Despite this, Worms is confident about the ESF’s future. It has funded so many research projects itself that the expertise is now there to advise others, he says. “We felt that it was an asset having decades of experience in terms of managing the evaluation of our own grants and proposals,” says Worms.

This has resulted in the development of strong principles of evaluation, on independence and conflicts of interest to pass to others, Worms says. “There are places such as southern and eastern Europe where the best practices of evaluation and peer review are not yet fully developed.” The ESF also has a valuable database of scientists to consult for evaluation and peer review. “We are talking about a pool of researchers across various disciplines which stretches to the 20,000 mark,” he says.

**Signs from the ESF’s existing activities** in research support are positive: for example, the EU’s Graphene Flagship, with which the ESF has worked since 2012. “The ESF has been a very valuable partner,” says Jari Kinaret, director of the flagship. “By organising a competitive call it has brought in quite a few new partners.” The ESF now leads the flagship’s work package on alignment, to link nationally funded work with that paid for by the European Commission. It also handles cooperation with Korea, the US and Japan. “Later, we may have more international partners and the ESF will certainly be involved,” Kinaret says.

Worms says that assisting in international collaboration will certainly be on the cards for the ESF going forward, with a visit already scheduled to the Chinese Academy of Sciences. But the ESF’s main focus will be on issues closer to home. “The big problem Europe is facing today is that there is a decreasing emphasis on collaboration between countries, leading to a large duplication of efforts,” says Worms. “We plan to help build the evidence base to improve this. This is what the decision-makers need at the end of the day.”

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