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EMBO to set up research awards

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The [European Molecular Biology Organization](#)(EMBO) has announced it plans to set up a program of research awards funded by member states. The idea was sanctioned at a recent meeting of the European Molecular Biology Conference (EMBC), a gathering of the 24 member states of the nearly 40-year-old body.

It marks a change of direction for EMBO, which boasts 1200 scientist members, more than 36 of whom have been awarded the Nobel Prize. So far, the organization has focused its financial resources on providing fellowships for research scientists, organizing courses and workshops and supporting promising young investigators in molecular biology.

Announcing the move in a [press statement](#) released last week, EMBC president Professor Julio E. Celis said it would make the organization "even more central" to the promotion of biosciences in Europe. But he also made it clear that the program could act as a prototype for other, more ambitious programs, such as the planned [European Research Council](#).

The proposed council has been a topic for discussion for several years. In February, EMBO and other leading bioscience bodies in Europe - including the [European Life Sciences Forum](#) and the [Federation of European Biochemical Societies](#) - backed the idea in a bid to stem the [flood of Europe's brightest young minds to the US and elsewhere](#).

The details of how the research project will be funded and administered have yet to be worked out. But according to [Professor Frank Gannon](#), EMBO executive director, it marks an "historic step."

"This funding will be investigator initiated and selected, like all EMBO activities, solely on the basis of quality," he said.

It's now anticipated that discussions will start among interested member states and a formal agreement will be drawn up by next year.

According to an EMBO spokeswoman, member states will be asked to opt into a special project in order to finance the scheme.

"The money will ultimately come from member countries but that does not mean every one will have to join," she said. "It could be just half, or it could be all of them," she said, adding that the question of whether members who opt out will still have access to grants is subject to negotiation.

John Tooze, former executive director of EMBO and now based at [Cancer Research UK](#), said he welcomed any initiative that promised to boost research funding for molecular biology.

"Any properly run scheme that allows access to additional funding must be a good thing," Tooze told us. "If you can get extra funds into the system as a European level that must be a benefit. But I would not advocate a system that meant taking away from national research grants."

He added that there might be some problems drawing up the criteria for what qualifies as molecular biology research. "One of the issues they may have to face is whether molecular biology is a discipline, or a methodology," he said. "The criteria for awarding grants could be tricky."

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