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## European Research Council doubts

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Doubts are mounting in the European scientific community about the direction of plans to create a European Research Council (ERC). There is broad support for the council in principle, but widespread concern over how it will be administered and funded.

An expert group reporting to the [European Council of Ministers](#) recently **recommended** that the ERC be set up within the budget of the next [European Commission \(EC\) Framework Programme](#), the main source of centralized European research funding. This is generating worries that the ERC will become entangled in EC bureaucracy and politics.

Chris Leaver, vice chairman and chairman-elect of the UK [Biochemical Society](#) told us he was seriously troubled by the plans due to the way the existing Framework Programme is run. He believes many scientists across Europe feel the same way.

"If the ERC is run along the same lines as the Framework Programme, it will be a complete disaster and nobody will sign up to it," he said. "One senses there is a lack of scientific coordination and planning within the EC itself."

Leaver's comments were made in the light of a [report](#) from the UK [Royal Society](#), which described current developments to set up an ERC as premature. The Royal Society called for a rigorous analysis of how science is funded in the EU member states before a decision is taken establishing the ERC.

The report warns: "Without a significant improvement in the information available across the European Union, central policy at best will be difficult to develop and at worse the decisions taken may be counter-productive."

"Different people have different expectations of what an ERC would deliver, and that's very muddling," Julia Higgins, vice president of the Royal Society, told us. "There is just not clarity of thinking yet, about exactly how you would do it and how you would fund it."

Higgins accepts that if European Commission money is to support the ERC, then the commission must be involved in administering it. "The Royal Society would not say the commission must not run it, but we would say if it is going to, it cannot be run like the previous Framework Programmes," said Higgins. The key issue for Higgins is that ERC grants would need to be distributed solely on the basis of scientific excellence and not for any political reasons or to ensure each country gets a balanced return on the money it contributes.

Lennart Philipson of Sweden's [Karolinska Institute](#), and former director general of the [European Molecular Biology Laboratory](#), told us that he expected widespread opposition to the process of setting up the ERC. But accepting that "the ball has started to roll," he said, "the important issue now is to assure that the ERC becomes a science-led activity away from the bureaucracy of Brussels." In June 2003, he published his own [proposals](#) for an ERC that "must be led and administered by scientists."

Philipson and Leaver share Higgins' concern that an ERC that is too close to Brussels bureaucracy would not take decisions solely on the basis of good science, but would also be influenced by political considerations.

Leaver said he could support the ERC "as long as it was science-driven and based on excellence in science. But I know that EU money is such unpleasant money to deal with that it is almost not worth going for. For every pound given to science, the bureaucratic cost is very significant." He is also concerned that funds used to support the ERC will be diverted from national funding programs, which are already overstretched.

"Letting the same people who run the Framework Programme also run the planned ERC would doom this enterprise from the start," said Gottfried Schatz, president of the [Swiss Science and Technology Council](#), speaking to us in December. Schatz is highly critical of the bureaucracy and enforced networking that he feels accompanies all Framework Programme activities.

The European Commission's latest opinions on the ERC came within a general [communication](#) on the way forward for basic research in Europe, released on January 14. The commission sees the creation of an ERC as an important part of its wider efforts to bind European research efforts into a cohesive [European Research Area](#).

The next formal step in the process comes in February, with a presentation on plans for the ERC in the [European Parliament](#). A political decision is expected sometime in 2004, although the ERC itself is unlikely to be set up before 2007.

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