

**REPORT OF SCSS WORKING GROUP ON  
“SOCIAL SCIENCE AND A EUROPEAN RESEARCH COUNCIL”**

**Strasbourg, February 2004**

**1. Introduction**

Social Science embraces the scientific study of society. Research in social science is critical to the long term economic and social well-being of societies and covers a broad spectrum of substantive disciplines and research paradigms. Effective interaction between social and natural science is also essential if the products of research in the natural sciences are to be optimally utilised for the good of society.

Europe has a strong cadre of world class researchers in the social sciences and European countries perform extremely well on all metrics of social scientific performance. However, as with the natural sciences there is an urgent need for research funds and infrastructure so as to maximise the output of this strong base and to ensure that the next generation of European social scientists is nurtured.

This paper is the report of a Working Group of the Standing Committee for the Social Sciences (SCSS) of the European Science Foundation set up to examine the issues surrounding the establishment of a European Research Council (ERC). The Working Group met twice: on October 1, 2003 and on January 28, 2004. It was chaired by Professor Ian Diamond and comprised Professor Patrice Fontaine, Professor Elisabeth Panayotatos, Manfred Niessen, Trygve Lande (October 1), Arvid Hallén (January 28) and Henk Stronkhorst (January 28). The Group considered a discussion paper (Annex) which explores some of the issues.

The Working Group welcomes the advent of an ERC. The objectives of this paper are to highlight the characteristics of an ERC which the SCSS believes will best serve the needs of the social science community throughout Europe.

**2. Principles guiding an ERC**

The guiding principles of an ERC should be scientific quality and independence. All research activity should be governed by a search for scientific excellence. Research topics should be curiosity driven (and here social science has the same interests as the natural sciences) rather than guided by a policy agenda. The working group agreed that it would be essential that an ERC complemented existing national support for research; it should not replace it, and there should be no suggestion of a hierarchy of funding sources, with an ERC being superior to national sources.

An ERC should work to preserve the extraordinary richness in the variety of issues covered, the schools of thought, the methods used, the research cultures and perspectives in European social science which are major cultural resources in their own right. There are some significant research traditions that are constrained within linguistic and cultural boundaries. Language and culture are at the same time both topics of research and woven into the fabric of research processes.

### **3. Key activities for an ERC**

The working group considered many potential activities for an ERC. It was agreed that the following were the most important for the social sciences and should be pursued:

#### **3.1 Support for cross border collaborative research**

An ERC should support curiosity driven basic social science research funded in response to applications from the best social scientists in Europe. It should accept applications across all of the social science disciplines and from all methodological perspectives. There are two areas in which the Working Group believes an EC could make a really effective contribution to the development of knowledge.

First, the SCSS believes that the most distinctive and effective contribution an ERC could make to the funding portfolio would be to create a platform for funding collaborative research carried out by at least two investigators who would normally need to seek funds from more than one country. This would encourage collaboration by the best social scientists and would overcome the current requirements for a coordinated funding decision.

Second, for the social sciences, unlike much of the natural sciences, regions and nations are, in themselves, important topics of study. For example, social science is concerned with the impact of a region's culture or of its micro economy on, say, its industrial management style and practice and this in turn has implications for productivity. The SCSS believes that an EC has an important role in funding research which is inherently transnational or European in nature while, at the same time, encouraging national research councils to continue to fund research which focuses on regional or national issues.

#### **3.2 Development of Social Scientific Research Infrastructure**

World class twenty first century social science requires major investments in infrastructure. While it is still possible, in some areas of social science, to undertake leading edge research with relatively little infrastructure, much social science requires the use of large data sets and sophisticated computing power. These data sets are increasingly costly to collect and to maintain. If Europe is to maximise its potential in social science research it will be essential to ensure access to appropriate data. Given the costs involved it will be necessary to develop strategic priorities. The Working Group believes that an ERC should take the lead in developing a long term European

social science infrastructure strategy that complements national strategies and prioritises those initiatives on databases and initiatives on the enhancement of methodologies which would most appropriately be carried out at a European rather than a national level.

With regard to data an ERC should ensure easy access to important microdata which would require liaison with appropriate national statistical agencies and the fusion of data of various types for example, social, administrative or biological.

### **3.3 The Development of the Next Generation**

An ERC should facilitate the maintenance of the long term health of social science disciplines within Europe and promote the development of truly European-wide research communities by supporting networking amongst scholars at all stages of their careers. With regard to junior scholars a particular task will be enabling mobility between the leading social scientific institutes.

Support for exchange of scholars will be essential to nurture the development of multidisciplinary teams often working in partnership with other sciences.

### **3.4 Development in Capacity Strengthening**

There are two areas where an ERC could play an important role. First in developing the skills of new researchers and in enhancing the skills of established researchers. Second, in facilitating the development of social science in research emerging nations. In this latter role it will be important to link with national aid agencies.

### **3.5 Developing strategies for evaluating outputs**

An ERC should have a role in identifying and quantifying European social science excellence, together with areas of need for special support. At present, many of the indices used for this purpose, for example bibliometric indices, are inappropriate for the social sciences which have a much broader diversity of output. Therefore it will be essential that indices are developed which have the confidence of the research community and take account of the distinctive context in which social science research is undertaken and the channels through which it is disseminated.

## **THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND NEW STRUCTURES FOR SUPPORT OF RESEARCH IN EUROPE (October 2003)**

### **A1 Introduction**

A1.1 The debate taking place within science policy circles and some governments about the need for new structures of support for research in Europe has crystallised into a debate about a possible “European Research Council” (ERC), which many see as being capable of meeting the perceived needs of European research.

A1.2 Among the most prominent contributions to this debate so far are the following:

- The Report from a Conference in Copenhagen in October 2002, organised by the Danish Research Councils on “Do we need a European research Council?”

<http://www.forsk.dk/dkeuformand/SummaryReportFinalok.pdf>

- A statement by the European Research Advisory Board (EURAB) (02.055) on a European Research Council.

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/eurab/pdf/recommendations3.pdf>

- Report of a meeting organised by the European Life Sciences Forum in Paris in February 2003. <http://www.elsf.org/elsfercpubs/elsfercpuba2.pdf>

- The Report of a High Level Working Group, constituted by the ESF to review the option of creating an ERC, chaired by Sir Richard Sykes (April 2003).

<http://www.esf.org/publication/159/ercpositionpaper.pdf>

- In addition, an Expert Group under the chairmanship of Professor Federico Mayor was set up in November 2002 by the Danish Ministry of Science and will prepare a report about possible options for an ERC for EU Research Ministers meeting in December 2003. (A provisional report may be available in September)

<http://www.epsoweb.org /Catalog/EU/ERC-EG.htm>

A1.3 The debate so far appears to have been conducted largely from the standpoint of the physical and life sciences. With one or two exceptions, those who have been most prominent in the debate have come from these backgrounds, and there appears to have been relatively little input from social scientists, or consideration of the potential impact on the social sciences. This paper, therefore, aims to redress this omission, by considering the implications for the social sciences of a possible ERC. Firstly, however, it reprises the arguments for an ERC.

### **A2 The case for a European Research Council**

A2.1 The ‘Sykes’ Group (see 1.2, above) reviewed the options for creating a European Research Council comprehensively. Their Report includes perhaps the most developed case for an ERC.

**a) Weaknesses in current European funding arrangements.**

A2.2 The Sykes report argues for an ERC by seeing it as a solution to what they call “weaknesses in the current European science funding system”. They argue that research in Europe is driven too much by short-term needs and perceived economic and social priorities at the expense of underlying fundamental research. This contrasts with the position in the US.

A2.3 Underlying this position is the problem of a lack of any European wide mechanism to support fundamental research; and even where it exists, it cannot mobilise funds quickly. There are also difficulties with support for interdisciplinary research in Europe, with the mobility of researchers, and the risk of inefficient duplication of effort. National research funding is characterised by Sykes as being inward looking, generally closed to non-residents, and with little cross national co-ordination.

A2.4 On the other hand, EU funding is seen as “complex and cumbersome with rigid procedures” and allocated according to criteria which are not exclusively scientific, likely to be subject to partisan decision making, constrained by Treaty requirements to increase industrial competitiveness and support policy development, not responsive to changing circumstances.

A2.5 While an alternative source might be private sector investment, this is problematic because it is principally concerned with short-term funding and applied research, and aimed at “near-market” problems. There are fewer private foundations, and they are less diverse and committed to long term funding, than their counterparts in the US.

**b) How a European Research Council will address these weaknesses.**

A2.6 The Sykes report does identify some positive features in European science – it cites examples of good cross-national, pan European collaboration such as in research infrastructure (shared neutron reactors and oceanographic ships, for example); programmes within the Framework Programme such as New and Emerging Science and Technology, Access to Infrastructures, and Mobility; other collaborative arrangements which bring together critical masses of researchers in infrastructure facilities (such as EMBL, in molecular biology), research networking, and some ESF initiatives, as well as limited bi- or tri-lateral arrangements between national research funders.

A2.7 However, it argues that this is not enough , and calls for a new funding body which “encourages and nurtures scientific excellence ... irrespective of origin” and location, which encourages European-wide use of research infrastructure, and which sets out to attract or retain outstanding researchers in Europe.

A2.8 Such a new trans-national funding body, a European Research Council, would, by prioritising scientific excellence, stimulate pan-European collaboration and competition between research teams, and would be expected to raise the quality of research. Like virtually all contributions to the debate, the Sykes report argues that an ERC should be particularly focussed on curiosity-driven, “basic” or “fundamental” research markedly increasing the available funding for such science. EURAB calls explicitly for “rigorous, independent, transparent international peer review” for this

work. Sykes suggests that an ERC could also provide advice on those science policy issues such as mobility, which transcend national borders.

### **3 Issues and implications for the social sciences**

A3.1 While many of the arguments put forward for an ERC can be applied to the social sciences as other disciplines, the social sciences are, in some important respects structurally different from the other sciences, particularly the natural and physical sciences. Hence, it becomes important to consider how, and in what way, these particular characteristics, which derive from the history, culture and methodology of the social sciences, differentiate them from the other sciences, and to consider any implications this might have for the debate on an ERC.

A3.2 The social sciences are different from most sciences in terms of their diversity, the size of typical research undertaking, working language, and the nature of the research issues that they tackle.

#### **a) Diversity**

A3.3 In a field of knowledge which attempts to understand and interpret human behaviour, it is hardly surprising that there is a broad diversity of approaches and topics. This diversity means that there is an extraordinary richness in the variety of issues covered, the schools of thought, methods used, research culture, and perspectives which are a major cultural resource in their own right, and potentially invaluable in terms of meeting future challenges of economic and social transformation in Europe, let alone unknown future research agenda.

A3.4 An intrinsic element of all proposals for an ERC which seeks to raise standards, is competitive research funding. While for most researchers within the social sciences, there is already competition for funds, and so the prospect of further competition is not necessarily problematic, there is a risk of damage for European social science if there are fewer, larger cross-national competitions. This is because social science's strength of diversity is likely to be eroded as competitors tend to trim proposals towards more widely appealing themes and approaches in order to maximise their chances of being successful. It is also the case that, in many competitions, success goes to those who have already been successful, thus reinforcing tendencies towards concentration.

A3.5 There is a need for a cross-national study of diversity in social science research.

#### **b) Size**

A3.6 Although there is, without doubt, a movement towards bigger projects in the social sciences, particularly with topics such as surveys and cross-border or cross-cultural comparative work, these are still the exception to a predominance of small, and in many cases almost individual, projects. Social science research takes place in relatively small projects, not because of a lack of available resources but because of its subject matter and appropriate research methodology. And even where projects are large for social sciences, they are usually small by comparison with the natural

sciences, where research methods require a team of researchers and/or major equipment.

A3.7 A major argument proposed by the supporters of an ERC is the opportunity it offers for assembling a critical mass of researchers and funding beyond the capacity of a single nation. While this may be important in a very small number of cases, it is not on the whole relevant for social science research, and nor does it offer any advantages.

A3.8 On the other hand, as it seems unlikely that a Europe-wide funding agency will wish to deal with what it regards as relatively small projects, there is a serious risk of pushing social science into larger projects for the sake of it. There is a need for evidence in this area.

**c) Language**

A3.9 The diversity of approaches and, in some cases, the small-scale of activity in the social sciences may be reinforced by language. As in the humanities, there are significant research traditions which are constrained within cultural and linguistic boundaries: this is particularly the case in the accession states. There is undoubtedly less use of English as a common language in social science research across Europe, than in other scientific fields. This is an aspect of diversity which multi-national competition may damage, and the disadvantages of homogenisation indicated above, apply here as well. Any ERC will need will need to reflect this.

There is also a need to consider the extent to which outputs are in the national language to a greater extent in the social sciences than in other subjects.

**d) Research topics**

A3.10 There are also important differences between the social sciences and other sciences in terms of the content of research. However, the breadth of the social sciences in term of disciplines and topics may mean the implications for different groups of disciplines or topics of research might be quite different. While most proponents suggest an ERC would be “topic-neutral”, being long-term and “curiosity-driven” there is a presumption in favour of work variously described as with a “European dimension” (Sykes) or “at a European level” (EURAB), as well as for interdisciplinary work and work in emerging areas.

A3.11 First, some areas of social science, such as Psychology are, like other sciences, researching phenomena which are not culturally specific. Here, we should expect the implications to be the same as for other areas of science.

A3.12 Second, there is a group of work which is intrinsically international or even European, because it might involve cross-national or cross-cultural comparisons, or might be about an international phenomenon such as trade or inter-state relations. This is an area of Social Science which would expect to benefit from the easier engagement with researchers and material in other countries, and the availability of additional funding for European projects.

A3.13 Third, there are significant areas of social science research which are of primary interest only within speci fied national (or even regional) boundaries. For

example, analysis of the implications of a particular government policy or the workings of a national parliament might only be of limited interest outside the country concerned, but could be the subject of high quality research. It might be argued that such work should not compete for funding by the ERC, and is appropriately funded nationally. On the other hand, (and particularly if the national funder has transferred some of its resources to the ERC), if this research is the best of its type in Europe, then there would be a strong argument that they should have access to ERC funds.

A3.14 There is an urgent need to provide data to inform the above issues and hence on which to develop policy. It is proposed that SCSS asks all member nations to engage with such a study.

## **A4 Other issues**

### **a) Research infrastructure**

A4.1 Social science does not, in the main, rely on expensive physical equipment for major research. Hence, the arguments made in the Sykes report and the EMBO report on the life sciences, (although not in the EURAB paper), that an ERC is essential to bring together sufficient resources to provide major infrastructural facilities, is not generally relevant. (This is not to be unaware that it might be relevant to social scientists working in a small national research community).

A4.2 However, there is an increasing need for large, cross-national datasets and these could be enormous. The recent Danish initiative is thus welcomed. There may be a case, therefore, for an ERC supporting large cross-national social scientific infrastructure. However, it needs to be recognised that such infrastructure would be likely to be of benefit only to a minority of social scientists.

### **b) “Basic” and applied research**

A4.3 A consistent principle of calls for an ERC is that it should be mainly (if not exclusively) concerned with “basic” or “fundamental” research. These are sometimes used interchangeably with the terms “bottom up” or “curiosity -driven” research, i.e. research whose agenda is set by the researchers themselves or by the logic of scientific development through the collective work of the scientific community.

A4.4 Researcher-driven research agendas are as plentiful in the social sciences as elsewhere. However, the distinction between “fundamental”, “basic” or “curiosity-driven” research on the one hand, and “applied” research on the other, may be neither as sharp in the social sciences as it is elsewhere, nor may it be as significant. In addition, research relevant to 'professional practice' is significant in the social sciences but would be less relevant in some other disciplines.

A4.5 In some respects, an emphasis on “policy relevance” is probably less restrictive in the social sciences than elsewhere, as a much greater proportion of the work that social scientists do, might be construed as potentially “policy relevant”. Whether or not this is damaging to social science research will depend to a considerable extent on the position of the organisation funding this type of research, in their determination of what they regard within their remit, the extent to which they balance their policy needs against scientific quality, how closely they control what



researchers do, and how closely they stick to immediate policy concerns. Furthermore, as a curiosity-driven social scientific research agenda does not preclude policy relevance, then any shift from one to the other may be limited.

### **c) Financial resources for research**

A4.6 A crucial, and so far unresolved, issue for a prospective ERC is its source of funding. The Sykes report calls for additional resources for “basic” research, and suggests one of three practical options, a transfer of existing national funds, a transfer of funds within the Framework Programme (its preferred option), or a mixture of the two, with the hope that further additional funds from non-public sources will be generated. The implications for the social sciences are unclear and might be different in these cases.

A4.7 Once a funding “pot” is secured there is a risk that the social sciences will lose resources to other fields of science, although balancing the competing needs of different fields of science is not a new problem for most national funders.

A4.8 If there are funds transferred from existing national budgets, two effects might come into play. First, it is inevitable that the proportion of funding allocated for social science might represent a different proportion of total research funding than at present in some countries. Where it is less than at present, there could be grave damage to that national social scientific community.

A4.9 Second, there might be a content effect. For researchers in any one country, there might be a net transfer of funding from work on topics which might only be nationally funded to those “European-oriented” topics which might also be funded by an ERC. Whilst this may affect the opportunities for individual social scientists, and the distribution of resources *within* the social sciences, it is not clear what net impact it would have on the social sciences as a whole.

A4.10 If additional resources are generated for research, then social sciences can expect to benefit alongside other sciences. On the other hand, if there are no new resources generated, then there may be a net transfer of funds from other areas of research to “basic ” or “fundamental” research. This could have an impact on some social scientific disciplines.

## **A5 Governance and related organisational issues of an ERC**

A5.1 There are a range of other major issues surrounding proposals for an ERC, some of which have been highlighted in the debate so far, but which, as they are not unique and do not appear to have particular implications for the social sciences, have not been addressed in this paper. They include issues such as governance, the instruments of research funding, and relationships with other organisations, including national funders and the European Commission.

## **A6 Conclusions**

A6.1 The implications of new structures of support for research for the social sciences are far from clear at this stage. Even where there are implications, the heterogeneity of the social sciences means that disciplines and sub-disciplines are likely to be affected in different way.

A6.2 Looked at generally, there are potential dangers to the diversity of the social sciences, particularly where this involves languages other than English, and to the continuation of the relatively small scale of research activities. There could be some implications from the emphasis on a “European dimension”, and some research topics may benefit at the expense of more obviously “national” topics.

A6.3 There are two major conclusions from this report:

a) There is a need for data on which to develop a policy on the ERC. It is proposed that SCSS should ask member organisations to engage with such a study which would involve data collection on national funding.

b) There is a need to develop a vision for research in the social sciences over the next decade. This vision should address the key core social science challenges which need to be addressed by researchers in the social sciences; the major cross-disciplinary questions; and the future capacity needs. Such work could also include some benchmarking of European social science against global competitors. It is proposed that SCSS should lead this work.