Competition versus Equal Development

This memorandum forwards some ideas on the dilemma 'competition versus equal development' with respect to the further development of the European Research Area and the funding of European research.

According to the European Research Council Expert Group (ERCEG) the creation of a European fund for fundamental research and a managing organ, the European Research Council (ERC) to manage it, is a crucially important step to be taken in order to achieve the goals set by the Lisbon Summit for Europe to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world. This ERC is to guide and manage a basic European Research Fund, which is to be used to fund internationally excellent research via a competitive process of international peer review.

In the preliminary reactions of the European Commissioner Busquin and the Director of DG Research Mitsos to the work of the ERCEG and in their further views on the European funding of fundamental research, emphasis is repeatedly been placed on the idea of fostering basic research solely on the basis of competition without a requirement of collaboration or the fair distribution of funds between member states. As the sole criterion for the acceptance and funding of research proposals, open competition, international peer review, and scientific quality undeniably comprise a sine qua non for the promotion of top level research in Europe.

At the same time it should be acknowledged that an exclusive emphasis on top quality and competition for excellence may interfere with another important objective for Europe's scientific development. That objective is to assure that the growth of science and technology in the accession states (and eventually in the other Eastern European countries) takes place at the same pace and with equal chances as it does in the Western European states. Due to less privileged economic conditions and sub-optimal infrastructures, many excellent scientists in Central and Eastern countries cannot compete on an equal footing with their Western colleagues.
Such a situation is objectionable not only for reasons of fairness and solidarity, but also for reasons of benefit and self-interest of European science: we need to mobilize all the scientific expertise available (ALLEA's reaction on the ERC-proposal). This concern is even more pertinent in the pre-accession countries as well as other European countries that envisage joining the EU further into the future. Many of the Central and Eastern European countries have an increasing number of well-trained, highly motivated students, with a strong interest in science and technical subjects; an interest which is declining at an alarming rate within the student population of Western Europe.

The same concern was raised in a recent open letter to Research Ministers in the EU member states, written on behalf of All European Academies (ALLEA), the European Science Foundation (ESF), the European Academy of Science and Arts, Academia Europaea, and Euroscience, and stressing the need to make the 'Constitution for Europe' more useful to the scientific community in an enlarged Europe. The letter stated "...that the European scientific community wishes to stress that the Constitution for Europe should alleviate the threat of creating a Europe of two (or more) speeds in the research area. The scientific communities of the periphery countries and regions must be well integrated into the European mainstream of research".

The European Parliament has expressed similar concerns. This has become apparent in a recent report 'On investing in research: An action plan for Europe' (com (2003) 226 2003/2148 (INI)) of the Committee on Industry, External Trade, Research and Energy. The report argues that in view of the EU's growing global responsibility, international research cooperation should be intensified. In this connection great importance is attached, among other things, to increased cooperation between Member states and accession countries. In an explanatory statement the report defends the claim that "....even if the applicant countries were to raise their expenditure, they would still be dependent on additional help from the EU....".

The issue being addressed in this memorandum was discussed by a number of representatives from Research Councils and Academies of Science at the recent general assembly meeting of the ESF, Nov. 27-28
2003, in Strasbourg. There the following views and suggestions were brought to the fore:

1. With respect to the envisaged funding of fundamental research within the scope of the ERC no compromise or concession should be allowed as far as the requirement of scientific excellence is concerned. Grants and subsidies should be given only to the best proposals and the best researchers or research groups in an open competition and based on reviews by international panels.

2. The same uncompromised criterion of quality should be applied to the granting of scholarships for the promotion of talent (Curie type programmes).

3. The disadvantaged position of scientists from a number of accession and pre-accession states with a less privileged economic status is, however, cause for concern. The general view was that specific measures should be taken to ensure that these countries are able to gain on Western European countries. It was also argued that such measures should be temporary ones, since there is no reason to assume that these countries will not draw level with the rest of Europe in due time. In line with these views, the following recommendations were made:

4. In order to make the environment for research more equal throughout Europe a part (say 10%) of the structural funds should be reserved for research infrastructure in the accession countries. At present such funds are largely used by the receiving countries for purposes of building railways, roads, etc. Earmarking for the benefit of research facilities could also improve 'roads for Europe' - but this time roads for brains rather than for cars.

5. A specific share of the coordination funds (coordination of national research priorities) should be reserved for agreements with (pre-)accession countries.
6. Part of the *social funds* should be used to make up arrears with respect to the quality of secondary school education in science in accession countries. This could be accomplished by means of a programme for upgrading of science teachers, and particularly for those based in rural areas.

7. In order to counteract the danger of brain drain, which, on a large scale, is detrimental for many (pre-)accession countries, some of the scholarships for young researchers should be awarded *within* the country of residence. Such scholarships should include support for infrastructure, so as to make the research environment 'at home' more attractive. Alternatively, scholarships that enable researchers to spend a number of years in a laboratory in another country should provide support for their return (including employment for a specific period of time, as well as support for infrastructure and facilities).

8. With an eye on specific needs and potential contributions of accession countries, participation of experts from these countries in European planning-, advisory-, and review-committees should be warranted and encouraged.

9. An over-emphasis on young researchers (Curie fellowships and others) in accession countries could have negative consequences for the necessary support of the older middle-range researchers - who are often lagging behind, but who are still responsible for managing and monitoring the research of younger staff members. In terms of the age of grantees leniency could be prudent.

10. The goal of preparing and upgrading pre-accession states may be best served by using Central European states as intermediaries. Scholarships and grants, as well as support for collaboration between those countries and the stronger states like Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic could create a good intermediary stage on the road towards equality within the greater Europe.
11. Let Academies of Sciences in the accession countries assist in determining the nature of the student and researcher grants, since they know best how such programmes and grants could best fit the needs of the country.

Amsterdam, Dec.7, 2003,

Pieter J.D. Drenth,
President ALLEA.