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# Horror over plans to shake up ERC rules

## Removal of 'excellence is all' strategy will undermine flagship

**A PLAN TO MAKE** the EU's flagship European Research Council provide funding to academics based on criteria other than just excellence has provoked outrage among researchers.

MEP Dan Nica said in a report published on 13 July that a rule that requires ERC evaluators to consider only the quality of proposals when deciding what research to fund should be dropped from the EU's 2021-27 R&D programme Horizon Europe.

Nica, who is one of the two politicians leading the European Parliament discussions on Horizon Europe, told Research Europe that excellence should be a factor across the programme. But he added: "For the ERC, I think the other conditionalities will complement the excellence criteria and will be an added value."

This might include tweaking criteria to favour young researchers and facilitate mobility while avoiding a brain drain from some countries. This would help make the success rate for those applying to the ERC "more reasonable" Nica said, "keeping in mind severe budgetary constraints and the already too high over-subscription".

However, the suggestion has been met with stiff resistance from some quarters.

It would be "the end of the Framework programme", said Dan Andrée, a special adviser to Sweden's ministry of education and research and to the country's innovation agency Vinnova. Considering aspects other than excellence would undermine the attractiveness of the ERC to researchers, he said.

Instead of downgrading excellence, countries should use their national funding or EU structural funds to support research rated excellent by the ERC but that cannot be funded by it owing to budget shortfalls, Andrée said. "The evaluation system is so good at the EU level that we don't need to do it ourselves."

Research associations said that they would oppose Nica's suggestions, and that ERC success rates should instead be raised by increasing its budget.

"The strength of the ERC is that we say excellence and excellence only," said Kurt Deketelaere, secretary-general of the League of European Research

by Ben Upton and Craig Nicholson

Universities, whose members compete strongly for ERC funding.

Stephan Kuster, secretary-general of the association of research funders and performers Science Europe, also said that changing the ERC's assessment criteria would be "a serious mistake". "Having scientific excellence as the only criterion in the ERC is a big element of its success and we wouldn't want to put that at risk," he said.

Not all researchers are against the idea. Alberto Baccini, an economist at the University of Siena in Italy, believes use of excellence alone made funding "more and more concentrated". He said its use in his field, including by the ERC, had led to a "narrow, self-referential academic community" that can't properly scrutinise theories.

Luke Georghiou, deputy vice-chancellor at the University of Manchester in the UK and an innovation adviser to the Commission, said he supported the use of excellence alone, but that there were questions about "how narrow a peak that should be".

"It is critical to keep open as many entry points as possible and to subject successful incumbents to realistic competition," he said.

Deketelaere also expressed concerns about some of Nica's other suggestions, including that the EU's geographical R&D divide should be cut by half and that collaborative projects should not allow either men or women to make up less than 40 per cent of their cohort. He questioned how these would be enforced, and whether researchers would want to be included in projects for tokenistic reasons.

MEPs could yet change or reject these ideas when formulating the position they will take into negotiations with research ministers, who have also yet to agree their stance. Overall agreement on the proposals for Horizon Europe is hoped for by May 2019.

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