MOLECULAR ONCOLOGY 8 (2014) 447–457

available at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

www.elsevier.com/locate/molonc

Shaping science policy in Europe

Julio E. Celis[a,*,1], José Mariano Gago[b,c,d,2]

[a]Danish Cancer Society Research Center (DCRC), Copenhagen, Denmark
[b]Instituto Superior Técnico, Lisbon, Portugal
[c]LIP, Portugal
[d]Instituto de Prospectiva, Portugal

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 11 March 2014
Accepted 11 March 2014
Available online 21 March 2014

Keywords:
ERA
European science policy
Role of scientific organisations
European Research Council
H2020
Health, Demographic Change and Well-Being Societal Challenge
Scientific Panel for Health

ABSTRACT

The Lisbon Strategy was adopted by the Heads of State and Government of the European Union (EU) in 2000. By moving science into a central position for the development of a European knowledge-based economy and society, its adoption at political level seems to have been a powerful catalyst for the increased involvement of scientists in science policy in the EU. Recognising the need for scientists to act collectively in order to contribute to shape the future of science policy in Europe, a pioneering group of European science organisations leaders and representatives, as well as other scientists, initiated a European, interdisciplinary, inclusive movement leading to the creation of the European Research Council (ERC) to support basic research of the highest quality. Having scientists' campaign for the funding of bottom-up research by the EU Framework Programmes exclusively on scientific grounds, and for an ERC, was a unique event in the recent history of European science policy. For the first time, the scientific community acted collectively and across disciplinary or national boundaries as a political actor for the sake of a better science policy for Europe. As is often the case when first-hand experience is gained through the creation of a new organization, novel forms of collaboration arise. The European biomedical community has recently proposed the creation of a strategic action plan for health research (the European Council of Health Research; EuCHR), provisionally translated at present into a Scientific Panel for Health (SPH) research in Horizon 2020, the EU's research-funding programme for the period 2014–2020. The creation of such Scientific Panel should be viewed as an important contribution by the biomedical community as a major political agreement has been reached on the need for a comprehensive and long-term scientific strategy to accelerate research and facilitate innovation at EU level.

It is our belief that describing and analyzing the process leading to the creation of the ERC and SPH (2002–2014) should be widely shared with the research community in general, as this may contribute to the understanding of the evolving relations between scientists and science-policy making.

* *Corresponding author.*
E-mail addresses: jec@cancer.dk, molonc@cancer.dk (J.E. Celis), gago@lip.pt (JoséM. Gago).
[1] Former Secretary-General of FEBS.
[2] Former Portuguese Minister of Science, Technology and Higher Education.

1574-7891/$ – see front matter © 2014 Federation of European Biochemical Societies. Published by Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.molonc.2014.03.013

1. Introduction: the European Research Area (ERA)

At the Lisbon Summit of Heads of State and Government of the European Union (EU) in March 2000, science was for the first time politically endorsed as a major driver for the future of the EU alongside the deployment of information technologies and their promise of an "information society". The "Lisbon Strategy", as it became known, announced a bold agreement by all EU States to "work towards making the EU the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustained economic growth, providing more jobs and achieving greater social cohesion" (http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/00100-r1.en0.htm). Progress in the basic sciences was then recognised as being as important as innovation. Moreover, bringing together, as convergent players, R&D institutions, and programmes at national, intergovernmental, and EU levels was set as a major objective.

This promise was followed by a commitment at the Barcelona EU Summit in 2002 to increase (public and private) the R&D expenditure in the Union to 3% of GDP by the year 2010. For the first time, heads of governments proposed a substantial increase in the EU budget for research. This move stimulated the scientific community to collaborate and to engage in science policy issues in order to achieve the goals set up for the "European Research Area" (ERA), a concept conceived by the then European Commissioner for Research, Philippe Busquin as a consequence of the political objectives set by EU governments. Busquin developed the idea of the ERA as a dynamic space of convergence of all science and technology actors in Europe. Such a concept would provide a framework for setting political priorities for EU science policy, by bringing together across borders academy and industry, national institutions and programmes-, as well as European Commission (EC) funding programmes and initiatives (http://ec.europa.eu/research/rtdinfo/en/26/recherche1.html).

Although Busquin's ambitious goal was to be watered down over time by national interests, lobbying by industry and bursts of EC zealous demands for exclusive legitimacy, it did contribute greatly, at those very levels and in society at large, to strengthening and motivating a larger constituency for the development of science in Europe. In fact, it helped trigger novel collaborative efforts by the scientific community at EU level, which was encouraged to contribute to, and indeed shape, the future of science policy in Europe.

2. Involvement of the life sciences community in ERA: The European Life Sciences Forum

The Federation of European Biochemical Societies (FEBS), one of the largest organisations in European life sciences at that time, with nearly 40,000 members distributed among 36 Constituent Societies throughout Europe, had already recognised the societal responsibility of scientists and was determined to structure and amplify the input of the biochemical community to science policy across the life sciences (Celis, 2000; http://www.febs.org/). Towards this aim, in 1999, Julio E. Celis, biochemist and Secretary-General of FEBS, put forward to the Executive Committee a proposal to establish a Science and Society Committee which would bridge the gap between scientists and society. Such a committee would identify and deal with issues arising as a result of new research developments. Moreover, since research in the life sciences was becoming multidisciplinary, he emphasized the need to join forces with other international organizations to achieve a global vision for the life sciences. Accordingly, at the Council meeting in Nice in June 1999, Celis informed the assembly that he was in conversations with the European Molecular Biology Organisation (EMBO; led by its Executive Director, Frank Gannon), the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL; led by its Director-General, Fotis Kafatos), and the European Life Science Organisation (ELSO; led by its President, Kai Simmons) to create a Forum for the life sciences in Europe.

Shortly thereafter, at a meeting hosted by EMBO at the EMBL in Heidelberg, a group of prominent life scientists agreed to work towards the creation of such a Forum, and at a meeting in May 2000 it was decided to formally establish the European Life Sciences Forum (ELSF), which embraced a broad alliance of life science, biotechnology and biomedical researchers (Celis, 2000; http://www.biokemi.org/biozoom/issues/493/articles/1981; Van Dyck and Peerenboom, 2003). A small governing body was appointed consisting of Frank Gannon, Fotis Kafatos, Kai Simons, and Julio E. Celis as President. Luc van Dyck joined as manager six months after the organisation was created. The secretariat was set up at the EMBL/EMBO facilities in Heidelberg and the EMBL, EMBO, and FEBS offered to cover a large fraction of the expenses for a period of 3 years.

The aim of the ELSF was to support scientists in taking a more active role in strategic and science policy issues, to speak with a unified voice in areas of general interest, and to increase the visibility and impact on policy making of organisations representing the life sciences (Celis, 2000; http://www.biokemi.org/biozoom/issues/493/articles/1981; Van Dyck and Peerenboom, 2003). Preliminary activities of the ELSF included identifying and contacting key stakeholders, establishing close connections with Commission officials in Brussels, and providing input to Framework Programme 6 (FP6), the EU's multi annual (2002–2006) research and technology development programme.

In addition to the aforementioned activities, the ELSF identified as priorities the career of young scientists and the creation of a European Research Council (ERC) to support basic research (see below). At that time, the life sciences community was concerned about the fact that the EU Framework Programmes (FPs) were among the few instruments available to implement the ERA vision, and had reservations about the efficiency and effectiveness of these programmes which were seen to be highly bureaucratic (Van Dyck, 2002). In addition, most of the budget was dedicated to industrial development, and there were no instruments to support high level basic research across Europe. Thus, there was a clear need for new instruments to implement the ERA's goals.