

Research

'ERA chairs' initiative to prevent brain drain

By Marie-Martine Buckens | Monday 10 December 2012

On 17 December, Research Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn is set to launch the 'European Research Area (ERA) chairs' initiative to foster research and innovation in the member states suffering from a structural deficit in these sectors. This is a way to address repeated calls from new member states and certain Mediterranean countries for special measures to allow them to fully participate in research programmes financed under the future Horizon 2020 Framework Research Programme (2014-2020).

At the 29 October Research Council, 12 member states proposed allocating a special 'bonus' to their researchers participating in Horizon 2020 in order to compensate for the significantly lower level of their salaries compared to their Western counterparts and try to prevent them from leaving the country. The goal of ERA chairs is to bring outstanding academics to research institutions in regions that may not "have performed well so far in the use of EU funding, but have high potential for research excellence". These scientists, the commissioner told a select group of journalists on 7 December, should have positive effect on institutions – raising standards and attracting more money and highly qualified staff.

The initiative will start with a pilot phase, financed under the current FP7 R&D programme. A total of €12 million has been dedicated to this pilot. Five ERA chairs could be awarded with a maximum EU contribution up to €2.4 million each. A maximum of one ERA chair per country will be selected for the pilot, and the host institution must be located in a convergence region. The commissioner recognised that the number of ERA chairs will not be sufficient to cover all the regions they are aimed at, but she stressed that it was only a pilot phase that could be scaled up under Horizon 2020 – provided the budget gets approved. With this proviso the commissioner was alluding to the 27's tricky negotiations on the multiannual financial framework (MFF) 2014-2020. Over the summer, the Commission will have to select five institutions to take part in the pilot phase; these institutions will then select the ERA chair holders "using an open, transparent and merit-based recruitment," the commissioner said. These chairs are not the only way to bridge the gap between 'rich' and 'poor' countries. Geoghegan-Quinn announced that Horizon 2020 will also support twinning of different regions, staff exchanges, and expert advice and assistance; the upgrading of research infrastructure and equipment will come under the remit of the EU cohesion policy.

Charts on research spending per country are available at www.europolitics.info > Search = 326336