

# EUREC position on a European Innovation Council

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## Scope

These comments are prepared from the perspective of researchers in the energy field, the suggestion of course is intended to cover all fields of applied research.

## Context

This proposal is to be seen in the context of the Horizon 2020 mid-term review, which is an opportunity to find funding for new initiatives. It comes as 'Mission Innovation' is launched at the COP21 climate talks, which challenges the governments of the world to double their funding towards energy R&D in five years. Part of this increase should be delivered in the form of grants from a 'European Innovation Council'.

**“An ERC for excellent science and an EIC for excellent innovation”**

## What is the nature of the problem that needs tackling?

Europe lacks a funding instrument targeting early-stage researchers in applied research, meaning in our view research that takes a technology from around TRL 4 to around TRL 7 or 8. The European Research Council has the mandate to fund 'frontier research'. Its mission says, this term "was coined for ERC activities since they will be directed towards fundamental advances at and beyond the 'frontier' of knowledge."<sup>1</sup> Even if it is not formally excluded from this definition, applied research is not the target of the ERC because applied research does not bring about "fundamental advances".

Also, the ERC's rules are set up for basic research. ERC evaluations are done only on the criterion of excellence, while a high-quality applied research proposal would rather need to demonstrate potential for impact in the market combined with efficient project management.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://erc.europa.eu/about-erc/mission>

## **Are there any major gaps / shortcomings in current innovation policies and programmes?**

If the ERC's mandate were to fund basic research, it would be doing a great job. We propose to restrict its mandate to a mission to support basic researchers as that is in any case the way it works already. The EIC would be a new entity that addresses researchers in applied science. As it started up, the ERC attracted scientific talent by offering substantial grants. Competition for the grants was and remains fierce. Being an ERC grantee is a seal of quality that opens doors for the researcher even after his/her ERC project is over. If the EIC establishes the same reputation, high-quality research will be funded and, because of the focus on TRL 4-7 technologies, this research will have a greater immediate economic impact than ERC projects.

## **What should be the role of the EU and the remit of an EIC?**

The EIC will, through a permanently open call with frequent cut-offs, solicit proposals for applied research. A typical EIC project will be proposed by a single researcher or a small team of researchers, who might elect to bring in an industry partner, for example an SME. Proposals that have the support of industry partner, for example expressed in a letter of intent that substantiates the claim made for the project's potential impact on the market, would be at an advantage. An early-stage researcher will have a leading role in the project, assuring at a minimum its scientific coordination.

The call will be open at all times to all the subject areas of Horizon 2020 found in its Industrial Leadership and Societal Challenge pillars. It would share some features of existing Horizon 2020 'bottom-up' instruments:

- Flexibility on the share of funding to industry (like FET-Open)
- Project budgets should be comparable to those called for by FET-Open ("up to 4 M EUR") and FTI ("2-4 M EUR")
- The evaluation should be quick (max 6 months to grant agreement, like FTI), with several cut-offs during the year.

It follows that the profile of the project leader will be a researcher with entrepreneurial flair and a talent for spotting innovations that industry would be very interested in taking up. If the EIC manages to gain a prestigious reputation, they might use the fact of being an EIC grantee to successfully attract investors to help them take their innovation further once the EIC project is over. In this way they could see it all the way to full commercialisation (> TRL 9).