



## Seminar to present partnership opportunities between South Africa and the European Research Council (ERC), with the participation of Prof Jean-Pierre Bourguignon: President of the ERC

January 2015

The Department of Science and Technology (DST) in collaboration with the National Research Foundation (NRF) hosted a seminar to present partnership opportunities between South Africa and the ERC, including a new bilateral programme between the ERC and the NRF.

The purpose of the event which took place on 13 January 2015 was to present the role of the ERC and the opportunities it offers to South African researchers by the President of the ERC, Prof Jean-Pierre Bourguignon.

Prof Bourguignon was in South Africa from the 13<sup>th</sup> January 2015 on a working visit to raise awareness of the ERC and its opportunities amongst the South African research community. The visit was to strengthen S&T cooperation between SA and EU. As President of the ERC, Prof Bourguignon is one of the most senior science leaders in Europe. He is also an eminent scientist (mathematician) in his own right.

ERC grants are very prestigious and afford funding for advanced as well as younger researchers to establish research teams at European institutions. According to the ERC rules, grant-holders can work a significant amount of time per year outside Europe, which means that they can maintain an affiliation with their countries of origin. This offers rich potential for South African participation in the ERC funding schemes to significantly enhance South African research and innovation.

During the visit to South Africa, Prof Bourguignon met the Minister of Science and Technology in South Africa, Minister Naledi Pandor and senior officials of the Department of Science and Technology. He also met with the President of the country's National Research Foundation, Dr Albert van Jaarsveld (<http://www.nrf.ac.za/>) and senior officials of the NRF. The ERC and the NRF are currently preparing a new cooperation programme which will afford funding for young South African researchers to undertake short-term visits to Europe with working ERC grant holders.

The ERC President gave a **talk on the ERC opportunities at a seminar** targeted at researchers in South Africa at the South African Department of Science and Technology in Pretoria; on Tuesday, 13 January 2015 at 14h00. This event was presented by the Strengthening Technology, Research and Innovation Cooperation between Europe and South Africa (ESASTAP Plus). ESASTAP Plus is a platform dedicated to supporting research and innovation cooperation between South Africa and the European Union.

Among the South African success stories of cooperation with the ERC is the grant awarded to Prof Christopher Henshilwood of the University of the Witwatersrand, to establish a team



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at the University of Bergen in Norway. Prof Henshilwood is an archaeologist working on the early evolution of human behaviours among Homo sapiens and Homo neanderthalensis in southern Africa and Europe respectively. His aim is to explore whether and how climate change influences their cultural development. Prof. Henshilwood, was awarded a €2.5 million ERC Advanced grant in 2009, he said "*The ERC grant, with its innovative approach, has allowed our team to carry out ground breaking research in South Africa. The results of this project will greatly enhance the understanding of the early behavioural evolution of Homo sapiens*".

Prof. Henshilwood concurrently holds a South African Research Chair position at the University of the Witwatersrand. The combination of this position with his ERC grant is a clear example of the mutual benefit both South Africa and the EU can gain from the participation of South African researchers in ERC programmes.

### **Background information on ERC:**

The ERC is a European Union research council aimed at encouraging high-quality research in Europe through competitive funding. The ERC complements other funding activities in Europe, and is a flagship component of the European Union's Research Framework Programme, Horizon 2020 (H2020) which also has capacity building opportunities such as the Marie Curie Skłodowska Actions (MSCA). The ERC is now part of the first pillar - 'Excellent Science' - of Horizon 2020, the new EU Programme for Research and Innovation. The total budget allocated to the ERC for the period 2014-2020 is € 13.1 billion. This is an increase of 60 % compared to Framework Programme Seven (FP7).

Set up in 2007 by the EU, the ERC is the first pan-European funding organisation for frontier research. It aims to stimulate scientific excellence in Europe by encouraging competition for funding between the very best, creative researchers of any nationality and age. The ERC two core funding schemes are the 'ERC Starting Grants' for younger, early-career top researchers and the 'ERC Advanced Grants' for senior research leaders. Two smaller initiatives were added, namely the 'ERC Proof of Concept' scheme and the 'ERC Synergy scheme' (targeting small groups of principal investigators working together on one project).

The ERC operates according to an "investigator-driven", or "bottom-up", approach, allowing researchers to identify new opportunities in any field of research. Since its launch, the ERC has funded over 2,500 frontier research projects throughout Europe and has become a "benchmark" of the competitiveness of national innovation systems as it complements existing funding schemes at national and European levels.

ERC grant holders include 8 noble prize winners and 3 field medals winners.

### **Structure of the ERC:**



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The ERC is led by the ERC Scientific Council. The Scientific Council is composed of 22 eminent scientists and scholars, including some Nobel Prize winners. The members are appointed by the European Commission, on the recommendations of an independent Identification Committee.

The Chair of the Scientific Council is the President of the ERC and the formal representative of the ERC as well as its Scientific Council with the European Commission and other bodies. The President chairs the ERC Board and Scientific Council meetings and prepares the agenda.

The President is assisted by three Vice-Presidents who are equally the Vice-Chairs of the Scientific Council.

### **More information on**

ERC website:  
<http://erc.europa.eu/>

President of ERC: Professor Jean-Pierre Bourguignon:  
[http://erc.europa.eu/get\\_member/3718](http://erc.europa.eu/get_member/3718)

ERC Scientific Council:  
<http://erc.europa.eu/about-erc/organisation-and-working-groups/scientific-council>

Prof. Henshilwood's ERC project:  
<http://tracsymbols.eu/home/>  
[http://www.forskningsradet.no/prognett-southafrica/Nyheter/Stone\\_age\\_paint\\_shop\\_discovered\\_in\\_South\\_Africa/1253969702332](http://www.forskningsradet.no/prognett-southafrica/Nyheter/Stone_age_paint_shop_discovered_in_South_Africa/1253969702332)

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