

Research on population ageing: Commission awards new EU legal status to cross-border databank

A major multi-national research databank on population ageing will be the first ever research infrastructure project to enjoy a new European legal status that will make such projects easier to set up and simpler to run, the European Commission decided today. The Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) will become the first European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC). This will give it many of the administrative advantages and tax exemptions enjoyed by major international organisations, with much simpler procedures. SHARE-ERIC is hosted by Tilburg University in the Netherlands, provides open and free of charge access to data, and aims to help researchers understand the impact of population ageing on European societies and thus to help policy makers make decisions on health, social and economic policy. Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany and the Netherlands, with Switzerland as an observer, are the founding members of the new European Research Infrastructure Consortium SHARE-ERIC. Denmark, Spain, France, Italy, Portugal, Greece, Sweden, Poland, Ireland, Estonia, Luxembourg, Hungary and Slovenia are the other EU countries (along with Israel) which have so far taken part in the SHARE project and may sign up later to the new legal status.

Research, Innovation and Science Commissioner, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, said: "*Our ageing population presents crucial social and economic challenges for Europe. So it is good news that SHARE will become the first European Research Infrastructure Consortium. I hope other cross-border research infrastructure projects will also apply. That would be a major boost to our drive to complete the European Research Area by 2014: we received a clear mandate for that from Heads of State and Government at the February European Council. Meanwhile, SHARE's new legal status will help it to contribute to European and national policies to improve quality of life for older people and their families and to reinforce our economies to cope with demographic change.*"

SHARE was already designated in 2006 by the European Strategy Forum for Research Infrastructures (ESFRI) as a priority research infrastructure for social sciences. The "ESFRI Roadmap" (see below), currently includes 44 priority infrastructures.

SHARE was set up in 2004 and is building a multidisciplinary and cross-national data set on the health, socio-economic status, and social and family networks of more than 45,000 individuals aged 50 and over. Access to data is open and free of charge. SHARE helps policymakers to understand for example: the implications of ageing for public finances, the labour market, income distribution and family life. The analysis of SHARE data will help European countries to more effectively prepare for the continuing challenges to their welfare systems in an ageing society.

SHARE is expected to become an important asset to other initiatives on population ageing such as the pilot European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing, currently being launched.

Since 2004, The European Commission has contributed € 30 million to SHARE covering almost 80% of total costs. About €5 million in funding has been provided by the US National Institute on Ageing and from other national grants.

The decision today to give SHARE the new legal status as a European Research Infrastructure Consortium, or "ERIC" for short, will help to ensure the long-term sustainability of SHARE, since "ERICs" benefit from a tailor-made legal and governance structure, allowing them to be set up quickly and to operate efficiently. The new status gives such infrastructures the flexibility to adapt their statutes to their needs. The Decision for SHARE provides for a General Assembly, a Management Board and a Scientific Advisory Board.

European Research Infrastructure Consortia can also benefit from VAT and excise duty exemptions similar to those of international organisations. In the case of SHARE-ERIC, for example, VAT exemption could reduce the cost of sub-contracting data collection services.

Further requests to become European Research Infrastructure Consortia are expected in the near future from at least eight other research infrastructures listed in the ESFRI roadmap.

Background

ESFRI was set up in 2002 and brings together delegates nominated by the Research Ministers of EU and Associate Countries and a representative of the Commission, working together to pool resources to provide Europe with the most up-to-date research infrastructures.

ESFRI's roadmap for 44 priority infrastructures – ten of which are now being implemented, with up to 16 more expected to begin by the end of 2012 – aims to help make Europe a world leader in several areas of physical, energy, biological, medical, social and ICT sciences.

Until now, the absence of an adequate legal framework for partners from different countries has been a difficulty leading to lengthy negotiations and delays in setting up ESFRI infrastructures.

In July 2008, the European Commission responded to these concerns by proposing a Council Regulation allowing the setting up of European Research Infrastructure Consortia, with a legal personality based on EU law (under Article 187 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union) and recognised in all Member States. The Council agreed this in May 2009 (see [IP/09/856](#)).

Under the system, Member States interested in jointly establishing a European Research Infrastructure Consortium must apply to the Commission. The Commission then checks the project's eligibility and makes sure it complies with the Regulation, before awarding the new status.

The flexible legal status of European Research Infrastructure Consortia is well suited to large-scale European ventures, and they are also open to the participation of non-European countries. They enjoy some of the privileges and exemptions granted to intergovernmental organisations but they should prove faster to set up and easier to manage.

SHARE website: www.share-project.org

European Research Infrastructures website:

www.ec.europa.eu/research/infrastructures

ERIC webpage: http://ec.europa.eu/research/infrastructures/index_en.cfm?pg=eric

ESFRI webpage: www.ec.europa.eu/research/esfri