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Interview with Jaume Bertranpetit and Mariona Costa

The contribution of the ICREA programme for foreign talent seizure and return

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Attract, convince and hire scientists to come to work to Catalonia – this is the task of ICREA (Catalan Research and Advanced Studies Institution), a body created by Andreu Mas-Colell in 2001 that searches professionals with research excellence, international exposure and leadership capacity. With a minimum staff and a good committee of experts from all over, it spearheads scientific talent seizure in Catalonia. At its front stands professor Jaume Bertranpetit, who represents almost 200 ICREA researchers working in university departments, research centres and hospitals. «Investment in research is crucial to build up the country in the long term», he asserts. The latest success of ICREA has been the inclusion of ten of its researchers into the recently created European Research Council (ERC). Of 300 projects chosen by this body, fifteen came from Catalonia, eight of which were led by ICREA researchers.



Jaume Bertranpetit and Mariona Costa are the directors of ICREA. This body is in charge of detecting good scientists from all over and offering them a work contract in Catalonia. ICREA currently employs almost 200 researchers and has calls for vacancies once a year to increase its staff.

What was the aim of creating ICREA?

Jaume Bertranpetit (JB): ICREA was created with the aim of fostering research in Catalonia through mechanisms to attract talent that did not exist then. So far this was dependent on

Success in the call of the European Research Council

Catalonia has achieved excellent results in attracting resources at the call for grants for young researchers by the recently created European Research Council (ERC), which shall pave the way for future European research integration. The call aimed at offering grants in three big fields: biological sciences, physical sciences and engineering as well as social sciences and humanities. The 300 projects that will receive funding were chosen from among 9167 applications.

Twenty-four projects from Spain have been selected, and fifteen will be for applicants doing their research in Catalonia. This success rate is exceptionally high.

Of the fifteen subsidies awarded to projects done in Catalonia, eight have gone to projects of researchers employed by ICREA. The fact that ICREA, with 185 researchers, ranks above much larger institutions confirms the right decision of the Government of Catalonia of driving high-quality research.

public bodies that not always are swift and efficient enough to attract talent. The then Catalan minister of Universities, Andreu Mas-Colell, made an analysis of the country that made clear that universities and research centres usually have very clumsy mechanisms to seize talent. For instance, we do not require recognition of foreign degrees, a requirement that so far slowed down procedures a lot.

«Having ICREA researchers is an investment as they are able to raise funds for research at a higher value than the cost of keeping the programme running. This is great for the country».

What is new in what ICREA provides for scientific professionals?

JB: ICREA is a direct, swift and efficient path. It currently offers a range of fixed contracts to the best scientific researchers willing to come to work in Catalonia, be productive and create synergies in their environment so the whole system can benefit from their presence. We say that at ICREA we are scientist headhunters. Our job is to attract, convince and hire scientists to work at the departments and centres where they are offered the best conditions.

«Universities and research centres usually have extremely clumsy and complex mechanisms to attract international talent».

How do you attract first-class scientists to Catalonia?

Mariona Costa (MC): Once a year, usually in spring, we do a call and offer a given number of senior positions with an open-ended contract to work in Catalonia. This year there were thirty vacancies. Our call reaches researchers abroad basically by word of mouth. It is the very directors

of the department or centre and scientists working in Catalonia who tell them the possibility of coming to work at their place. Also ICREA researchers advertise the programme. And of course, we also publish an advertisement in reputed science journals and on our website.

«Catalonia is very competitive in life sciences and biomedical research, but also in photonic sciences, organic chemistry and economics».

What is the applicant's role?

JB: The applicant is looking for an institution and an environment in which first-class research is done. They send us their CV and the place they wish to work at. It is not so much the applicant who looks for an institution but the institution that looks for an applicant. It is more efficient to have the centre looking for somebody with the required profile. Everybody who wishes can apply, but few get a contract due to the high level of excellence required, a level rarely asked for in Europe.

First we had especially Catalan applicants who wanted to return back. Then there were more Spaniards and now we have many Europeans returning from the United States because they want to raise their children in Europe after spending a long time there, or because their parents grow old or their partner wishes to return.

Who is in charge of assessing talent?

MC: This is done by an assessment committee, people with internationally acknowledged reputation who are in charge of studying the applications submitted and assessing candidates. Research excellence, international exposure and proven leadership capacity are searched for during the assessment process. None of the evaluators work in Catalonia. Conflicts of interest shall be avoided, endogamy broken up and fresh air blown into the sector.

Jaume Bertranpetit
Director of ICREA

Jaume Bertranpetit (Camprodon, Catalonia, 1952) is a professor of biology at the Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona, where he is at the front of the Unit of Evolutionary Biology at the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences. He has previously been a full professor at the University of Barcelona. His field of research is genetics of human populations, molecular evolution and interaction of human evolutionary biology with other disciplines. He has published over 190 research papers and is a member of the Institute of Catalan Studies and numerous international organisations.

His research focuses on understanding the genomic diversity in humans and other higher primates. Out of the description of evolutionary processes, comprehension of evolution mechanisms and eventually an explanation of observed phenomena shall be reached. The scale at which processes are observed can be populational, global or between species. The study of the different genomic regions can lead to understanding the mechanisms creating variation there. Among the analysed genetic variation, SNP diversity and the structure of the variation in the genome and diseases stand out.

Mariona Costa
Executive director of ICREA

Graduate in arts and humanities. BA and MA in philosophy at the University of Minnesota.

A former teacher at the Swiss School of Barcelona, publishing director at the Booket publishing house (Planeta Group) and general director of the AULA European School Society.

She joined ICREA as an administrator since its foundation in 2001. After two years in the private industry, she returned to ICREA in 2007 as its executive director.

Which is the next step?

JB: Once each case is reviewed, the evaluators make a proposal of which are the best. We send them a letter with a specific labour proposal. After two months, usually in September, the selected candidates come to Catalonia to know their place and negotiate the conditions. Here

ICREA, a recruitment tool

With a 16 million euro budget, ICREA is a foundation supported by the Government of Catalonia, through its Department of Innovation, Universities and Enterprise, and the Catalan Foundation for Research and Innovation (FCRI). The body is managed by a board. It hires researchers from all over the world by means of a selection process based on scientific talent, thus contributing to facilitate the return of own researchers having done their career at centres outside Catalonia.

ICREA collaborates actively with Catalan universities and research centres through stable agreements by which the ICREA research professors become part of research teams at these universities and centres.

In its seven years of activity so far, ICREA has recruited a total 200 researchers from very different fields: 32.5% in life sciences and medicine, 27% in experimental sciences and mathematics, 10% in social sciences, 13.5% in different fields of humanities and 17% in technology. The origin of researchers is also very diverse: 35% come from Spain, 36% from other EU countries (especially Germany with 11% and the UK with 10%), 18% from the US and 11% from centres in other countries around the world.

we clash with salaries which, despite being reasonable – similar to those of full professors at university – are below earnings elsewhere. If they have a personal reason to come, then it is easier to us. Besides doing a contract, ICREA also signs an agreement with the institutions where the selected candidates do their research.

Offering less but better paid jobs would not be a solution?

JB: We need to trade off between both possibilities – either many badly paid or few very well paid but with a very specific interest. We try to set a balance: as good as we want at a reasonable salary. We must not forget that the average salary of a full professor – upon entering and before six-year increases – is at around 50,000 euros, while in the US they earn up to 160,000 euros.

What is the relationship between ICREA and scientists once they are settled and working in Catalonia?

MC: ICREA researchers are regularly assessed as to productivity, exposure, leadership capacity and financial resources they have raised for research. For the country, having ICREA researchers is a net investment as they are able to raise funds at a higher value than the cost of keeping the programme running. This is great for the country.

«Many people want to come to Catalonia because they want to raise their children in Europe after spending a long time in the United States, or because their partner wishes to return».

How many women are there at ICREA?

MC: Women amount to 20% of ICREA researchers. At the last call, 30% of applicants were women. Generally speaking, as occurs in other areas, there is a big shortage of women. It is still an unsolved issue involving a wider area than research itself.

What is the profile of people interested in coming to Catalonia to develop research?

MC: The ICREA researcher profile is very heterogeneous; there is a big diversity in age, origin, marital status and family structure. There is not a typical profile. There are single scientists with no family and having few social life, young families with children, people in their midlife who never had thought they would have the opportunity to return to Catalonia, etc. Some wish to live in the city centre, others want to get away from it, some wish to teach, others don't...

Which is the most outstanding scientific area as to abundant talent in Catalonia?

JB: Life sciences is the area with most researchers. It is here where Catalonia is most

competitive, especially in biomedical research. But it is so in other fields such as specific areas of physics, chemistry and economics. In these areas Catalonia has a big appeal, and in the end it is all about this – talent attracts talent.

How does talent return?

JB: We don't need to recover all our talent. If we are able to attract as much talent as there is leaving, it's OK. Researchers in Catalonia do not need to have Catalan names. However, it is true that there are people who cannot come back because there is no place for them, especially if they are over 35, which is the age at which you have done your PhD and some post-doc stages. When settling, many think of returning to Catalonia but have not always access to ICREA. What is needed is to create more opportunities to welcome this talent.

What areas lack most talent in Catalonia?

We need scientists in all areas of science. Catalonia devotes 1.2% of GDP to research, while this figure in the US is as high as 3%. In the last call, we did a big effort to attract researchers in technology, humanities and social sciences. There are many gaps. However, it would be an error to increase suddenly the research budget to 2.1% as the efficiency of resources could not be ensured. The increase needs to be progressive.



▲ « If we are able to attract as much talent as there is leaving, it's OK. Researchers in Catalonia do not need to have Catalan names».

Do you believe that there is a lack of recognition and exposure of scientists?

JB: Yes, we need social recognition of scientists, and research is unfortunately often the most vulnerable part in government budgets because it does not create any social unrest. At ICREA we are convinced that research is paramount to development, innovation and economic growth. Investment in research is crucial to build up the country in the long term.

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Master in BCNY journalism at the universities of Barcelona and Columbia.

