

The Descartes Prizes 2006

European awards for excellence in scientific research and science communication

Background description

The *Descartes Prize for Scientific Research* has been awarded yearly, since 2000, to transnational research teams which have achieved outstanding scientific or technological results through collaborative research in any field of science. More precisely, the scientific areas are:

- Basic sciences(i.e. mathematics, physics, chemistry)
- Earth sciences
- Engineering
- Information society
- Life sciences
- Socio-economic sciences.

The amount to be shared among the laureates of the research prize is one million euros. There are maximum five laureate teams. Moreover, five finalist teams receive 30 000 euros each. To date, 16 laureate projects and 5 finalist projects involving almost 2 000 researchers from European and non-European countries have been awarded the prestigious prize.

In 2004, a second Descartes Prize was introduced, the *Descartes Prize for Science Communication*, in order to stimulate interest and careers in science communication and to improve the quality of science communication with the public. The areas covered by this Prize are the following:

- Professional scientists and/or communicators engaged in science communication to the public
- Popularising science through the written word (e.g. newspaper articles, popular science books, editorial policies)
- Popularising science through audio-visual and electronic media (e.g. scientific television or radio documentaries, websites, editorial policies)
- Innovative action for science communication
- Communicators at the start of their career (eg. first project, young talents) in all the above categories.

A maximum of five laureates share the 250 000 euros award and five finalists receive 5 000 euros each. For the two first editions in 2004 and 2005, ten laureates and five finalists from 8 different European and non-European countries have been awarded the Science Communication Prize.

Science in society significance

For scientific and technological progress to meet the needs and expectations of Europe's citizens, they need not only to be able to benefit from high-level research, but also to have information that is understandable and of high quality.

The two Descartes prizes perfectly illustrate the Community policy of giving importance and value to collaborative research at European level as well as appropriate communication of its results to the public. Making good science *and* communicating it efficiently is one essential ingredient to bring science and society one step closer. As a strong awareness raising tool, the Descartes prizes play a major role in that sense.

The recognition of the Descartes prize has been growing along the years of its existence. In terms of media impact, it is ranked at the highest level of the activities of the Research Directorate-General. The increasing success of the award ceremonies within the scientific community and the publicity that the laureates are making themselves about their winning this prize are proves of this growing attractiveness. Nevertheless, efforts to maintain this high level of reputation are on going, notably through encouraging even more proposals to the prizes, so to ensure a continuously higher quality of both scientific research and science communication in Europe.