

Article for The Euroscientist 4

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From Munich via Barcelona to Torino: ESOF is coming of age

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European research is making its mark and so is ESOF: with well over 4000 attendees from 66 different countries and including more than 400 journalists from all over the world, ESOF 2008 in Barcelona saw twice as many participants as the Munich edition in 2006. The biannual conference ESOF has clearly become a key meeting point for scientists, policy makers, business people and the media.

Europe as a strong, highly visible and innovation friendly partner on the global map of science! This is how I would summarise our vision since the early days, when we, a small bunch of Euro enthusiasts, set out to plan the first ESOF conference. Four years ago, the first ESOF conference saw the Scandinavian light of day. The “toddler”, as one speaker referred to ESOF 2004, was in high spirits and attracted 1800 participants to the city of Stockholm. The impact was limited but it was an encouraging start!

The Federal President of Germany, no less, opened the second Euroscience Open Forum in Munich in 2006. A broader scientific programme and a larger variety of big names were on offer. Nobel laureates unravelled the molecules' roles in the sense of smell, provided insight in protein structures or confessed to their passion for precision. Politicians, scientists and science policymakers, who had instantly perceived ESOF as an independent platform, debated the then hatching European Research Council and other policy issues openly, critically and constructively. The atmosphere during the Munich conference was just like the weather, warm and sunny. Throughout the event a cheerful crowd could be seen busily networking in the conference's “science beer garden”. Top mathematicians from France challenged their communication skills with German journalists, Spanish and Hungarian life scientists chatted with economists and physicists from the UK and Sweden, young researchers from different countries enjoyed their “Brezls with the Prof”, and Nobel-Laureates and Brussels' key policy makers could also be seen stuck in. However, as had been the case in Sweden, the journalists in Munich had missed debates on critical issues and distinctly European trends and anxieties, such as stem cell research or nuclear energy.

It was finally in Barcelona, that such critical topics and European challenges had made it onto the agenda of ESOF 2008. The two extreme positions of the UK and Germany concerning research with embryonic stem cells were de-

bated in a popular and lively afternoon session. Another session focussed on nuclear weapon decision making in Europe. The former Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK government, Sir David King, tackled the environmental challenges of the 21st century. For the first time, a full day was dedicated to allowing scientists and business people explore new ways to bridge the gap between industry and academia. In the hallway talks many sessions got high marks. However, one of the most popular sessions was a plenary lecture by Nobel laureate Aaron Ciechanover. He not only put across very vividly, why proteins have to die for the sake of human survival, he also passionately argued the way trends in science are being set by high impact journals, such as *Nature* or *Science*.

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Anyone attending ESOF 2008 will have been struck by the lively participation of young scientists and reporters, even in the early sessions of Sunday morning! Not least seeing the event had to compete with the appealing city of Barcelona and perfect weather.

However, it wasn't all plain sailing and certainly there were some flies in the ointment. The striking lack of women in the main programme, the underrepresentation of Eastern European countries and the press operation were subject to fair criticism, raised by prominent members of the European scientific community, by a group of international reporters and by other participants. After ESOF 2008 *Nature* wrote that the Euroscience Open Forum is a meeting to be proud of, but challenged the organizers to aim even higher. Although the Barcelona organizers did an excellent job, we should rise to this challenge.

There are a number of upcoming changes which will help us to do just that. Soon, all the lessons learnt in previous ESOF events will have an institutional memory. On the initiative of the Robert Bosch Stiftung, the Stifterverband, the Compagnia di San Paolo, the Fondazione Cariplo and the Stiftelsen Riksbankens Jubileumsfond will set up a permanent ESOF secretariat with a € 1.6 Mio starting grant to Euroscience. This central secretariat will take care of European fundraising; contribute to the international marketing and publicity of ESOF as well as manage the ESOF committees. However, a strong local involvement will still be retained in the hosting cities in order to continue generating a good local spirit and enthusiasm.

Even before Torino won ESOF 2010, the competition amongst potential host cities was fierce. An even more creative, yet fair rivalry is under way to host ESOF 2012. Major European cities regard science as an important asset for their future and so see ESOF as a weighty opportunity.

The timing for the convergence of a truly European scientific community couldn't be better: The European Commission has recently relaunched its concept of the European Research Area and the European Research Council has awarded its first round of grants. The landscape of universities in Europe

is undergoing dramatic changes with many of them gaining more independence and competing more than ever with each other on a European level. Universities have to increasingly mobilise funds in the private sector and depend more than ever before on public recognition. A strong catalyst such as ESOF is in high demand and I predict that more and more researchers, key policy makers, business people and journalists will opt for this fast lane towards a European scientific community. ESOF has come of age. Now, we have to make sure that it grows into a confident and highly respected adult.

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