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Euroscience Open Forum – Foundations team up for European research

We have all witnessed dramatic changes in what policy makers in Brussels call the European Research Area. Whereas many national research communities in Europe went international long ago, becoming genuinely European is a rather recent success! Since 2004 a series of conferences, the Euroscience Open Forum (ESOF), has provided a novel platform for European research. Substantially supported by a group of European foundations, ESOF brings together scientists, journalists, policy makers and others to discuss the latest trends in European scientific research.

Increasingly, funds for research are being coordinated on a European level. The European Research Council (ERC) has rapidly developed into the most prestigious grant agency for fundamental and high risk research in Europe. Within the upcoming EU Framework programme, Horizon 2020, European researchers can look forward to an 80-billion-euro package of proposed measures that aim to give European research, innovation and competitiveness a much-needed boost. Until not so long ago, the broader European public assumed that real cutting-edge research was going on elsewhere, mostly in the US. Americans not only spend more on research as a percentage of GNP, but they also talk about it in a very effective way. Moreover, China, India, Brazil and Singapore among others have rapidly drawn attention to themselves and entered the international research scene.

The ESOF agenda is science driven with eminent scientists from across Europe holding a majority on its Programme Committee. Like the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) meeting in the US, ESOF presents the latest developments in research across all scientific disciplines and in science policy. However, ESOF does this with a specific European perspective. It enhances the visibility of excellent European research among both the European and the international public. ESOF unites Europe's scientific community, including science journalists and policy makers, by providing independent discussion platforms for science policy issues and informal dialogue.

Wherever necessary, ESOF includes research and science policy issues, presented by speakers from outside Europe, such as the US or China. By providing a platform in which the scientific community takes the lead, ESOF complements the politically-driven research agenda setting of the European Commission and its framework programmes. Hence, the European Commission, but also national research organisations, are important partners of ESOF.

This summer, ESOF 2012 in Dublin presented a very lively and self-confident European scientific community to 5000 attendees from all over the world. Participants included Nobel Laureate Peter Doherty from Australia; Máire Geoghean-Quinn, the EU Commissioner for Research and Innovation; Alan Leshner, CEO of AAAS; Human Genome Sequencer Craig Venter from the US; and also numerous science writers from Asia, Europe, Latin America and the US. The youngest attendees were high school students from all over Europe and even other continents, and probably the oldest was the 84-year-old American James Watson, who won his Nobel Prize for the discovery of the DNA double helix 50 years ago. The students enjoyed the manifold opportunities to discuss



Journalist Carsten Könneker interviewing Professor Helga Nowotny, President of the European Research Council (ERC).

cutting-edge issues with some of the most outstanding scientists and science policy makers Europe has on offer. The “Breakfasts with the Profs”, including ERC President Helga Nowotny and CERN Director General and physicist Rolf-Dieter Heuer, were rapidly booked and more had to be organised during the conference to feed the never-ending curiosity of the many young attendees. When asked what they enjoyed most, the “Breakfast- Profs” would frequently reply that it was talking to the young people in small groups.

Judging from the impressive media coverage around the world, the journalists attending ESOF must have been working day and night. Most attendees, including me, did not see much of Dublin’s other attractions – too much was to be missed within the conference venue! At its fifth edition ESOF has clearly come of age.

The ESOF conference series was initiated in 2002 with little funds and no organisational structure in place. Right from the beginning, among others, foundations like the Robert Bosch Stiftung and the Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft made substantial contributions to the then ambitious and highly risky project. Two years later the first ESOF saw the Scandinavian light of day with 1800 participants attending the conference in Stockholm. In 2006 more than 2000 science journalists, policy makers, scientists and others attended the ESOF conference in Munich.

Up until the third ESOF in Barcelona in 2008, every hosting country for an ESOF conference had established its own administrative organisational structure. The annual handover from one team to another caused many details and valuable experience to be lost. Hence, the establishment of a more permanent structure for ESOF seemed compulsory in the long run. Again, it was five European-minded foundations, the Compagnia di San Paolo, the Fondazione Cariplo, Robert Bosch Stiftung, the Stiftelsen Riksbankens Jubileumsfond and the Stifterverband,

who joined forces to set up a permanent ESOF secretariat with a 1.6 million- euro starting grant to Euroscience.

This permanent secretariat, which is currently located in Strasbourg, has now established a database that all ESOF-hosting cities can build on. The secretariat has also set up statutes and is supporting the most important committees preparing the ESOF conferences, the Steering Committee and the Programme Committee. This ensures that preparing an ESOF conference will always be a genuinely European endeavour. However, a strong local involvement is being retained in the hosting cities in order to continue generating a good local spirit and enthusiasm. Over the years to come, ESOF headquarters must find strong permanent partners and build up an endowment, but ESOF’s science-driven agenda should not be compromised with it. Within its first decade this new conference series has become a powerful tool to strengthen and to raise the profile of European science internationally and outside the scientific community.

Europe’s future lies in a knowledge-based society. Often, the impact of European research in the international scientific community is still underestimated by the public, both in Europe and in the rest of the world. This must change, and ESOF is playing an increasing role in this. Promotion of science, research and innovation is therefore a top priority for ESOF’s founding partners, which include the grass-roots scientists organisation Euroscience and the above-mentioned foundations. As independent organisations, foundations may act much more freely, flexibly and quickly than public funding agencies. Thus, they are able to make a unique contribution to the research landscape and to act effectively as facilitators of change. ESOF, which was built on substantial contributions from foundations in its childhood years, is a wonderful example of this.

www.esof.eu, www.bosch-stiftung.de