

Report from COST Action: TN1302
STSM title: Group STSM to Flanders, Belgium
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Location: Free University Brussels, KU Leuven and Ghent University, Belgium
STSM period: from 03-10-2016 to 06-10-2016

Participant: Eveliina Klemola (Grant Advisor), Aalto University, Finland, eveliina.klemola@aalto.fi

Summary

In October 2016, I took part in a group STSM to Flanders, Belgium to visit Free University Brussels, KU Leuven and the University of Ghent. The goal of the mission was to exchange best practices and experiences e.g. on post-award finances and technology transfer, and to develop concrete tools for increased efficiency in proposal writing and project management. During the STSM, the group was introduced to a variety of topics related to both the pre- and post-award phase of research administration work. Topics that were presented and discussed were incentives and motivation of researchers, legal and financial management, technology transfer and the organization of support services.

My motivation for taking part in this STSM was twofold. Firstly, I wished to learn from these highly appreciated universities with skilful research support staff and to gain a unique insight into the research support services of other universities. Secondly, I wanted to get feedback on the practices currently at place in Aalto University. The STSM was beneficial in many aspects. However, the primary best practice I will bring back to my home institution would be what I learned about 1) practical tools in use to spread knowledge about forthcoming funding opportunities and changes in the different funding schemes and 2) how co-operation with the private sector is facilitated. Hearing about these and other practices has been truly inspirational and I am looking forward to exploring how this experience can be used to improve the work at my home institution.

Purpose of the STSM

The purpose of this group STSM was to visit three universities in the Flanders region in Belgium, VUB (Free University Brussels), Ghent University, KU Leuven, to exchange practices and experiences from EU research support and project management. My motivation for taking part in this STSM was twofold. Firstly, I wished to learn from these highly appreciated universities with skilful research support staff and to gain a unique insight into the research support services of other universities. Secondly, I wanted to get feedback on the practices currently at place in Aalto University. Currently I work as a Grant Advisor at the Research and Innovation Services of Aalto University (AALTO), Finland. Many forms of support are basically similar between these universities and Aalto University. By attending this STSM, I wanted to discuss the details of these services and develop these further with the help of mutually exchanging experiences. Moreover, there are many forms of support that these universities offer, which are currently missing in Aalto, and hearing more of these kinds of support would help developing the support services in Aalto even further.

Detailed description of the work carried out during the STSM

The STSM took place in the Flanders region from 03 October to 06 October. It started with a meeting at the UK Research Office (UKRO) in Brussels. The day started with presentations of the research funding system in Flanders, the host institutions and the visiting institutions (Aalto University, FI; Central European University, HU; University College London, UK; and Vytautas Magnus University, LI). Following the lunch break, Alexandra Berry from UKRO presented the latest developments the state of affairs in H2020 and FP9, followed by a lively free discussion between all participants on topical issues in EU funding in general and the differences between the practices of the organizations and countries. In the afternoon we visited the Parliamentarium (European Parliament's Visitors' Centre) and later in the evening we had a joint dinner at a restaurant in the city centre of Brussels.

The second day, we visited the Vrije Universiteit Brussel in Brussels. Here we had an introduction to VUB and research support services at VUB, specifically how an EU project is supported at VUB in each phase of the project lifecycle, from idea to exploitation of results. In the afternoon, we discussed consortium agreements, IPR issues, and financial management in EU-projects. In the end, we heard a coordinator of a H2020 project on her experience on co-operation with the support services at VUB. We also took a short tour in the campus.

The third day, the group visited Leuven, where we had an introduction to KU Leuven and its research policy, general structure of the Research Coordination Office (DOC) and the EU support team, their services offered, matchmaking on funding opportunities, communication and tools, workshops & trainings, stimulation policy & incentives, pre-award support and networks where KU Leuven participates. We also discussed financial procedures and IT tools in use in KU Leuven and best practices of financial reporting and audits in EU projects. During the lunch break we took a tour around the campus and visited the KU Leuven rectorate. In the afternoon, we had an introduction to the KU Leuven Research & Development tech transfer office (LRD), the EU support unit and its services, pre- and post-award EU project support to researchers, grant preparation, project management, and discussed consortium agreement management and other legal issues.

The fourth and final day, the group travelled to the University of Ghent where we heard about the organization of the European Research Office and support services, their European strategy and incentives and trainings offered to researchers. We got to see their newsletter tool first-hand. Then we discussed H2020 financial administration and reporting issues, including time-sheet management, and shared best practices in these. In the afternoon, we visited the Tech Transfer Office in the Technologiepark, where we heard about the Business Development Centers at Ghent University as an industrial liaison network, and discussed the technology transfer practices in more detail. The past part of the day was a meeting with coordinators of EU projects, but unfortunately, due to flight schedules, I was forced to skip this part of the program.

Contribution to the goals of the COST Targeted Network

One of the goals of the COST BESTPRAC network is to exchange financial, legal and administrative experience. It was truly enriching to meet research support staff from so many different institutions with versatile experience and ways of organizing their work. It was most reassuring to learn that everybody basically struggles with the same issues then we do in Aalto University. The host organizations facilitated knowledge sharing between the participants in an excellent way and many of the sessions were more dialogue than a lecture which truly allowed for exchange of experiences.

Another goal of the BESTPRAC network is to establish a network for research administrators. After this STSM, I have strong connections not only to the three host universities, but also to the other universities that participated in the STSM. I will surely utilize these connections in my future work regarding administrative issues but also in finding partnerships for the researchers in our university.

Description of the main results obtained

In the following section, I have summarized the main results and insights gained, grouped by phases of a research project. As a general remark, all of the three host universities have a clear division of labour in their research support staff between EU-funding and other funding sources, whereas in Aalto University, the same support staff handles all funding instruments. This is a major difference in the organization of work, but the discussions during the STSM focused mainly on EU framework programme funding.

Pre-proposal

The main issue that all universities seem to struggle with are motivating the researchers to apply for external, especially EU-funding, and to keep them up-to-date with forthcoming funding opportunities and calls.

The stimulation policies and incentives at KU Leuven are most impressive, i.e. that they have internal preparation funding for H2020 proposals, and how a part of the overhead goes to financing projects on the reserve list given that they resubmit/apply again. In Ghent University, the allocation of PI's salary to an externally funded project results in financial gain for the research group. I doubt that Aalto University will be able to implement similar incentives due to financial constraints, but nevertheless, it was very interesting to discuss and share the motivation strategies especially in SSH, which is the most problematic area of research to all hosts and participants.

The IT tool that University of Ghent uses for the newsletter was very interesting, and I will suggest a similar tool to be created in Aalto University. They can publish news in different categories (forthcoming calls, changes in funding rules, events etc.) and the subscriber can choose the frequency of the e-mail updates (s)he receives.

Proposal

The support given in the proposal phase seems to be quite similar in the three host universities and Aalto University. Model texts for the non-scientific parts of the proposal, such as exploitation and management, are available for the researchers. VUB uses external consultants for proposal preparation, whereas Aalto University employs own grant writers. Also in KU Leuven, the preparatory funding offered to the coordinated consortium projects may be used for paying for external consultants.

Project implementation

KU Leuven offers a somewhat similar kind of a project manager services than Aalto University. However, in KU Leuven, there are no separate people who work only as project managers, as in Aalto, which makes it difficult to draw the line between general advice and project-specific management.

All universities seem to struggle with the H2020 rules on internal invoicing. This problem was discussed widely, but without a clear solution or best practice how to tackle it. The issue has major financial implications, especially for the projects which include clinical trials at a university hospital. All of the universities are eagerly waiting for the EC to revise the rules. The same basically applies for H2020 rules on depreciation. We discussed how to define the full capacity of equipment and how to document the full capacity and the use of equipment.

The time sheet management practices vary widely between different universities, from fully electronic systems to fully paper-based with some in-between or mixed systems. The different technical solutions have different kind of restrictions, which have major implications for the project reporting. The same applies for the other IT-systems used in financial management of projects. The amount of manual labour (maintaining separate excel sheets etc.) related to the financial management also varies a lot between the universities. All concluded that proper IT systems are essential for efficient management, and the universities should prioritize these in their investment plans.

Also the availability of legal support for research projects varies greatly, as does the mode of working of legal counsels. Some of them work in a direct contact with the researchers, and some in the back office, and are contacted by the EU advisors, who also do a lot of pre-screening of contracts.

Exploitation of project results

The support for innovation and exploitation (commercialization) of project results was impressive especially in KU Leuven and Ghent University. They both have specialized technology transfer offices and wide co-operation with the industry and other private sector. The concept of knowledge brokers in KU Leuven was especially interesting. Aalto University is piloting a somewhat similar service ("innovation agents"). We will continue the comparison of these methods with KU Leuven.