

Report from COST Action: TN1302
STSM topic: Group STSM to Flanders, Belgium
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Location: Free University Brussels, KU Leuven and Ghent University, Belgium
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Summary

On October 2016, I took part in a group STSM to Flanders, Belgium, to visit Free University Brussels, KU Leuven and University of Ghent.

The goal of the mission and my motivation taking part in this STSM was to

- exchange best practices and experiences e.g. on post-award management, technology transfer, HR issues, open access and open data practices, ethical issues, research contracts and other legal issues;
- learn from three universities in Flanders and get feedback on the practices currently at place in Aalto University;
- develop good practices and concrete tools encouraging knowledge sharing and transfer, and increased efficiency in project management including legal services for research projects between Aalto University and three universities in Flanders; and
- meet and have in-depth discussions with staff from three universities in Flanders

During the STSM, the STSM 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 research support services.

The STSM was beneficial in many aspects. What I found very interesting and useful was the overall understanding of the processes and practices at place in three universities in Flanders. It was inspirational to discuss and share information with skillful and experienced research support staff.

Purpose of the STSM

The purpose of this group STSM was to visit three universities in the Flanders in Belgium: Free University Brussels (VUB), Ghent University and KU Leuven. Purpose was to exchange practices and experiences from EU research support and project management including legal aspects and technology transfer.

Currently, I work as a Legal Counsel at the Research and Innovation Services of Aalto University, Finland. My motivation for attending this STSM was to discuss the details and differences of the research support services at place in these highly appreciated host universities and my home university and develop services further with the help of mutually exchanging experiences. Moreover, I was also interested to exchange best practices and experiences related to legal support for research projects.

Detailed description of the work carried out during the STSM

The STSM took place in Flanders on October 3-6.

The STSM 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 restaurant in city centre of Brussels.

The second day the STSM group visited Free University Brussels in Brussels. 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 about 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 STSM 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 that 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 STSM group travelled to Ghent to visit Ghent University 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. 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 and legal issues. The last 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 reassuring to hear that everybody basically struggles with the same issues that we do in Aalto University. The host universities 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 COST BESTPRAC is to establish a network for for the administrative, finance and legal services in universities, research organizations and related entities supporting researchers involved in the lifecycle of transnational external competition based (in particular European funded) projects. After this STSM, I have good connections not only to the three host universities, but also to the other universities that participated in the STSM. I am sure I will utilize these connections in my future work.

Description of the main results obtained

In this section, I have summarized the main results obtained on my point of view during the STSM.

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 – national and international. This is a major difference in the organization of work. The discussions during the STSM focused mainly on EU framework programme funding.

The 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. Different kind of stimulation policies and incentives are applied to motivate the researchers.

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. Some universities use external consultants for proposal preparation, whereas Aalto University employs own grant writers.

Project manager services are somewhat similar in the three host universities and Aalto University. However, as opposed to Aalto University, there is not always separate people in Flanders Universities who work only as project managers. This 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. For now, all of the universities are eagerly waiting for the EC to revise the rules.

The time sheet management practices and IT-systems used in financial management of projects vary widely between different universities. The amount of manual labour (maintaining separate excel sheets etc.) related to the financial management also varies a lot between the universities. Strong mutual understanding was that proper IT systems are essential for efficient management.

Even though there is legal team in all the three host universities, the availability of legal support for research projects varies greatly. So does the mode of working of legal counsels. Some of them work in a direct contact with the researchers, as in Aalto University, and some in the back office, and are contacted by the EU advisors, who also do a lot of pre-screening of contracts, and some are specialized only certain funding instruments or technology transfer, as opposed to Aalto University. However, the difficulties legal counsels are facing are quite similar, e.g. difficult agreement negotiations with multinational companies.

The support commercialization of project results was impressive and very well organized in the host universities, especially in KU Leuven and Ghent University. They both have specialized technology transfer offices with legal counsels and wide co-operation with the industry and other private sector. The concept of knowledge brokers in KU Leuven was interesting. Aalto University is piloting a somewhat similar service (“innovation agents”) and we will continue the comparison of these methods with KU Leuven.

Eventually, the best practice I will bring back to my home institution, in addition to the overall understanding of the processes and practices at place in three universities in Flanders and fruitful discussions, would be what I learned about technology transfer processes and co-operation with the industry.