

Short-Term Scientific Mission REPORT

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#35363

Place, date of STSM: Leuven, February 20-22, 2017

Host institution: KU Leuven (Research Coordination Office)

1. Summary

The aim of STSMs “Research Coordination and Support: best practices” is to enable research administrators sharing practices on how to organise quality support for university research communities dealing with competitive research funding. The BESTPRAC provided excellent networking opportunity for me as a Head of Research Management Office at Vilnius University responsible for developing and sustaining research support office to meet and discuss aspects of research project management and related issues with representatives from KU Leuven. KU Leuven is the 6th most successful university in Europe in terms of H2020 funded research projects. My visit took place in Leuven (Belgium) on February 20-22, 2017 allowing enough time to meet various representatives from the central administration and discussing such aspects as structure of pre-award and post-award support, communication tools, ethical issues and integrity, collaboration with private sector, international cooperation and research support for Humanities and Social Sciences. The visit revealed some similarities and some major differences that should be taken into account while trying to take over some of the good practices, e.g. the available human resources in administration. These factors as well as ever changing situation in the competitive research programmes field, can affect the extent of the support for research projects, therefore constant adjustment of the priorities of research support office is very important. The actions that would enable researchers themselves to be more aware of the main principles of research management is also at the core of sustainable research support system. This STSM served as one of the concrete steps towards more strategic collaboration between Vilnius University and KU Leuven allowing knowledge sharing and was beneficial for personal contacts and new possibilities to strengthen the relations between the two universities.

2. Purposes of STSM

The main objective of this STSM visit was to obtain professional insights that would help implementing the strategic plan of Vilnius University via strategic activity 1.4. “Effective management of research projects”. Other leading universities as partners are appreciated in this

process, especially in building capacities and aiming to add to the solutions of grand societal challenges. Using networking opportunities provided by BESTPRAC, this STMS was planned as an opportunity to meet in person and to discuss day-to-day aspects of project management and related issues with staff from KU Leuven. KU Leuven for the STMS was chosen as a strongly research-oriented university having long tradition of partnerships and great results achieved during FP7 and Horizon 2020.

3. Detailed description of the work carried out during the STSM

The STSM lasted three working days. The schedule of the meetings:

Vilnius University, BESTPRAC STSM, visit to KU Leuven 20-22 February 2017

Visitor: Brigita Serafinavičiūtė, Head of Research Management Office, Vilnius University

20 Febr	10:00-12:00	Introduction to KU Leuven, research office, international research policy	Stijn Delauré, head of international funds
	12:00-14:00	<i>Lunch & visit to rectorate</i>	
		Support for horizontal issues:	
	14:00-15:00	- Ethical issues & research integrity	Inge Lerouge, ethics & integrity coordinator
	15:00-16:00	- Collaboration with private sector and industrial research fund	Veerle Cauwenberg, industrial research coordinator
16:00-17:00	- Open access to publications and data management	Stijn Delauré, head of international funds (replacing Hannelore Vanhaverbeke, head of analysis & output unit)	
21 Febr	10:00-11:00	EU research support services: structure and pre-award support	Stijn Delauré, head of international funds
	11:00-11:30	Pre-award services at multicampus university	Wannes Ribbens, adviser regional campuses
	11:30-12:00	Communication tools and pre-award advice for collaborative research	lesel Van der Plancken, adviser collaborative research
	12:00-14:00	<i>Lunch</i>	
	14:00-16:00	Introduction to KU Leuven Research & Development (LRD, TTO), and support for EU projects (@LRD)	Myriam Witvrouw, European and international projects
	16:00-17:00	EU research support services: post-award support	Stijn Delauré, head of international funds (replacing Patricia Pardon, head of finances)
22 Febr	10:00-12:00	International cooperation and bilateral agreements (@ rectorate)	Karine Op de Beeck, director international office
	12:00-14:00	<i>Lunch</i>	

The aspects that were discussed during the meetings are laid out briefly below:

Day 1

Introduction to the KU Leuven research office activities revealed specificities of the Flanders research funding system. The competitiveness is embedded on the regional as well as on the institutional level. An important aspect is that researcher who won internal funding at university has an obligation to apply for external follow-up funding. The external projects resulting from this obligation brings around 80% of the research funding at KU Leuven. If researcher ends up in the H2020 reserve list, they get funds to improve the application, but in 2-3 years they are obliged to submit the project under a suitable call again.

Research integrity is one of the research policy priorities for 2014-2016 and is an important aspect in research culture. However, it takes time to change the culture. The course about research integrity is part compulsory training for PhDs. There are 4 internal and 1 external committee that are responsible for ethical and integrity issues.

KU Leuven introduced Knowledge Brokers (industrial research managers) – centrally hired people but working decentrally, who work with specific research groups that expressed a wish and have a clear plan how Knowledge Broker will be beneficial to them. These people (currently 37) know very well the research topics of these groups, are active in generating project proposals, including H2020, and also act as bridges between researchers and related industry. Their main responsibility – valorisation of research results. The central office works very intensively with the network of these Knowledge Brokers. One person at central office works as a coordinator of this network. The positions of these people are permanent, however, the periodical evaluation of the results achieved and obligation to plan the adjustments to the changing environment is also in place. Several of them are extremely successful in acquiring European competitive funds in collaboration with private sector.

Open Access to publications and data management aspects are supported via archive and internal information system. Researchers have to submit their publications to the repository and that is also linked to the evaluation system. Library is the main actor in OA field responsible for practical implementations.

Day 2

EU research support does not include project writing, just pre-reading if really needed (2 people are doing this). A lot of emphasis is given to the information – targeted information as well as general trainings. The most effective way is more targeted events, meetings at department level,

and bilateral meetings with individual scientists. Another important activity – general trainings on various research project aspects: how to write it, how to tackle important aspects in the project, how to administrate. On average there is one training every two weeks. The staff is specialized on the basis of programs, not according to the research field. The office is constantly monitoring the results of the calls and adapts their strategies. It is evidence based support.

The enlargement of KU Leuven in 2013 (merger with 12 smaller schools of higher education located across Flanders) brought new opportunities as well as challenges. The aim is to have thematically specialized campuses. The central research support has one person who works as a bridge between Leuven and the campuses in other cities. He works mainly with research coordinators; however, they work quite differently in each campus. The efforts to support campuses outside Leuven are based on bottom-up approach via soft measures such as joint thematic events, match-making events.

Information about the funding possibilities are disseminated via webpage and a monthly newsletter. KU Leuven has extensive internal “participant portal”, where all important and relevant calls are described including internal contact person for the specific call. The general suggestions, help tools on how to write specific parts of a project are also in this internal portal. However, individual e-mails and meetings eye-to-eye, e.g. lunch meetings, are very important in effective communication.

The management of the projects after successful application goes to the TTO – Technology Transfer Office – except of the individual grants, that are administered by Research Coordination Office. Besides management of collaborative research projects, which is the oldest activity of TTO, the office is also responsible for intellectual property rights, spin-off’s, trainings about innovation aspects. TTO comes in the final stage of project writing and helps with the budget, other financial and legal aspects as well as with the actual submission of the project. A lot of useful information, flowcharts, tips, etc. can also be found on the intranet.

The management services are mainly oriented towards young researchers and those who are implementing a project for the first time (in this case management costs are payed from the projects). The management is done via internal project system. The financial offices are checking the situation of the budget every 6 months. The “financial antenna” at department level does not know the specific requirements – they only submit the information about the spending via the system, and the central financial offices are the ones who make financial reports.

Day 3

The internationalisation at KU Leuven mainly comes in at master level due to the strict federal language requirements. Research is an international activity *per se*. KU Leuven is strongly involved in the development cooperation. The bilateral agreements are mainly concluded with the

comprehensive universities that match KU Leuven profile. In the website an interactive map showing international agreements is provided. The central administration supports if necessary the agreements concluded at departments level.

Research support for Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) is mainly done via group of dedicated project developers supported from the central funds. The group was started two years ago and now 5 people are employed (4 of which are funded by the central Research Coordination Office). This group focuses on the project opportunities in Europe and advise on all types of funding, not only EU funding. The group mainly works with dedicated people in the departments. Their job is also to help finding partners for the projects – internal and/or external ones. They also started not only to giving feedback on the project drafts, but also helping writing specific parts of the projects (if KU Leuven is a coordinator). A project is always read by two people. The group is also trying to bring different researchers from different disciplines together that they would have access to wider networks. The important emotional aspect while seeking for effective support - is being physically next to the research teams.

4. Contribution to the goals of the COST Targeted Network

The visit to KU Leuven contributed to the main objective of BESTPRAC, as it helped to gain broader understanding of different good practices in administrating international research projects. As I started to work in research management office just a year ago and creation of effective research management system is one of the strategic goals of Vilnius University, the opportunity to experience how KU Leuven organises the support system was very valuable. The strengthened links with KU Leuven will be beneficial in future collaborations among research administrators and researchers as well.

5. Description of the main results obtained

The visit to KU Leuven revealed some similarities and some major differences that should be taken into account while trying to take over some of the good practices. Besides cultural differences and other naturally inborn institutional and/or country traditions as well as regulations, some other serious obstacles, such as available funds and human resources in administration are to be taken into account while trying to implement the good practices of other institutions/countries. Creative solutions should be found every time while trying to ameliorate the existing systems/tools. However, going to visits and hosting the visits like STSM is really beneficial for (re)gaining inspiration, getting new ideas or testing your own systems, tools. The visit to KU Leuven helped to crystallise several ideas to be tested and implemented at Vilnius University:

1) Research project managers network.

KU Leuven has a special network of Knowledge Brokers (or Project Developers) – centrally hired permanent staff to work closely with specific research groups aiming for potential commercialisation of the results as well as initiation and development of various projects, including H2020. This network seems to be very effective as these dedicated people are dedicated to that research group and know very well their research and results, thus are able to serve as a bridge between researchers and wider society. On the other hand, for central office they serve as a channel for spreading targeted information. This network approach will be tested in Vilnius University by i) identifying key people who are active with projects (administrative staff or interested researchers at Faculty level); ii) organising networking events for them; iii) using them as a channel for targeted information about project activities. A possibility to hire Knowledge Brokers centrally could be explored if dedicated funds will be allocated.

2) Trainings and seminars.

The experience of KU Leuven shows, that actions that would enable researchers themselves to be more aware of the main principles of research management is at the core of sustainable research support system. Therefore, Vilnius University will continue and expand training and seminar activities: i) basic courses on project management for doctoral candidates and young researchers, ii) special events dedicated to specific calls, iii) discussions, sharing of good practices and other types of events that would serve as community and awareness builders.

3) Constant adjustment of research support strategies.

Ever changing situation in the competitive research programmes field makes research institutions, even the ones successful in H0220, to monitor and adjust their strategies and tactics. Vilnius University will pay more attention to perform constant analysis on the results of the calls. This task will be included in the duties of some of the personnel working with research projects at central level. The insights of this analysis will allow to make sound decisions on what special measures should be taken in order to achieve the strategic goals.

4) Special research projects fund.

KU Leuven is very effective in reinvesting project money and creating leverage effects. Even though the financial systems in the institutions are different, however the example of KU Leuven will be used advocating for the need to enlarge internal Research Fund, that would allow not only funding short term research visits, but also would enable the support of researchers and their groups with special research money for the projects in the H2020 reserve lists or for those who are aiming to take the role of coordinator helping them to prepare strong proposal.

6. Future collaboration with host institution

On May 2016 KU Leuven has concluded the Central Europe Leuven Strategic Alliance (Celsa), a cooperation agreement with six universities from Hungary, Slovenia, and Czech Republic. A possibility to use the experiences of this Alliance to organize similar joint initiatives between KU Leuven, Vilnius University and other universities in the Baltic countries will be explored.

7. Dissemination

On March 6, 2017 a seminar-discussion was organised by Research Management Office at Vilnius University with the main aim to share the information obtained and insights gained during the visit to KU Leuven. The target audience was the staff of the Research and Innovation Department of Vilnius University and the staff of faculties working with research projects. It was attended by more than 20 people and served as one of the first steps of creating internal research administrators network at Vilnius University.

8. Confirmation by the host institution

(in attachment)