

The Dos and Don'ts of Getting an E.U. Grant

BRUSSELS—So you're an upwardly mobile European researcher and some European Union (E.U.) money might be just what your lab needs. But where to start? How do you get a piece of the €73 billion Framework 7 action?

The good news is that a whole industry of trainers, consultants, liaison officers, and research managers has sprung up across the continent to lend a hand. On the downside, they all caution that, although the rewards are enticing, learning to play the Brussels game is frustrating and requires a major, long-term commitment: It's less about filling out forms than a whole new career choice. And there are plenty of pitfalls.

For starters, your question is the wrong one, says Sean McCarthy, president of Hyperion, an Irish company specializing in Framework training. As he wrote in a paper posted on his Web site, "you don't go to Brussels looking for money for your research. You go there to help the European Commission solve a problem that *they* have identified." It's not enough, say, to show that you're an expert in detecting low-level toxic compounds in water, McCarthy explains; you have to know the politics, economics, and business of water quality and show how your research will result in the prototype of a new sensor that Europe needs to clean up its water.

Finding good partners is also crucial. The vast majority of the E.U.'s research money is distributed in chunks as large as €12 million or €15 million to consortia of 15 institutes or more. You can try to become the lead partner for such a group, but only if you're a European heavyweight who can persuade colleagues across the continent to join and your institute is prepared to help with the dizzying paperwork, says Willem Wolters, an E.U. funding specialist at Wageningen University in the Netherlands. Smaller players are well-advised to identify the hot shots and see if they can fill a niche in existing schemes, Wolters says.

Once the European Commission issues a call for proposals that interests you, there are usually only 3 months to apply, says Lene Topp of Rambøll Management, a Danish company that organizes training programs; that's why it's important that you organize your consortium months or even years in advance. At the same time, it's crucial that the final proposal exactly fits the call, she says—don't try to slip in unrelated ideas, however brilliant. "Many applications go straight out of the window because they don't fit the criteria," Topp says.

The proposals that survive the first screening are then ranked by panels of independent experts, flown to Brussels by the commission. Try to get on one of these panels, Topp says, because it's a good way of getting to know the process and increasing your chances the next time around.

Applying political muscle to get proposals to the top of the pile is generally not appreciated, but it is very common to lobby earlier on, when the commission and the European Parliament establish research priorities—a phase that is just starting for Framework 7. But beware: "Lobbying is an American concept. In Brussels it is better to describe the process as briefing," McCarthy says. Whatever it's called, it can be worth it: Plant scientists, realizing 4 years ago that they were about to lose out in Framework 6, teamed up and very successfully briefed their way to a bigger share, Wolters recalls.

If you're a lead partner and your proposal is among the ones selected, you will be invited to Brussels for contract negotiations, which can last several months. Signing a contract doesn't end your worries, however. You have to make sure that all partners honor their part of the deal. (If not, the commission can and sometimes will ask for its money back.) Also, as a result of the E.U.'s past financial scandals, there's a crushing burden to account for every euro, Topp says. Be prepared to nag your partners about missing train tickets and flight coupons. Indeed, Wolters warns, "if you're a prominent researcher and you take on one of these projects, you can spend so much time on management that by the end you're no longer a prominent researcher."

Although Framework 7 promises some relief to the paperwork (see main text), none of the experts expect Brussels to become simple anytime soon. Yet, despite it all, many researchers do like to participate in European programs, says Menno van der Klooster of Utrecht University in the Netherlands, not just because of the money and the ability to attract staff, but also because it offers new perspectives on their research and an international network that can prove invaluable. So good luck.

—MARTIN ENSERINK



Grants guru. Don't appear to promote your own ideas, says Lene Topp.

applying for Framework 7 money go through a two-step process. The first application will require less paperwork and will involve only a concept proposal. Only those whose projects make a first cut will be asked to submit a full proposal.

In a staff working paper on simplification that, perhaps tellingly, runs nearly 10 pages, the commission also promises to establish an electronic database of applicants that should help speed the application and evaluation process. In his presentation to Parliament, Potočník urged delegates to ease some of the legal restrictions that bind the commission, leading to complex legal contracts instead of grants. "I hope we will gain the courage to give scientists more trust and autonomy than we have in the past," he later told journalists.

"We want this to happen."

The proposal outlined last week is far from the final say on Framework 7. The European Parliament now has a chance to scrutinize the commission's plan. Last time around, they weren't shy about sharing their opinion: The parliament offered hundreds of amendments to the Framework 6 proposal. The competitiveness council, comprising research ministers from all member states, will also offer comments. The commission will then submit a revised proposal, and the feedback loop will continue until the council of ministers adopts a final proposal.

That process could take up to a year and could face unexpected hurdles. In the months before Framework 6 was adopted, a coalition of countries threatened to block the entire program over funding for human embryonic stem cell research, which is restricted or even forbidden in some E.U. countries. Another fight over that issue is unlikely, because in the expanded E.U. the opponents no longer have enough votes to block the program. But some other burning issue of the day could flare to the surface.

As the process goes forward, scientists are likely to make some noise, says geneticist Kai Simons, a director of the Max Planck Institute for Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics in Dresden, Germany, and a longtime proponent of the ERC. "The change in atmosphere in the last 2 or 3 years is just incredible," he says. The commission has become more open, Simons says, but even more important is the fact that scientists have begun to make themselves heard in Brussels and are seeing real results: "Everyone realizes there are going to be real benefits from this. For the first time, they see a hope."

—GRETCHEN VOGEL

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