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Navigating the EU grant system

By Chris Tachibana



Even the EU calls it “getting through the maze”, but the rewards at the end are worth it

The European Union is a large, super-governmental agency, so naturally, its granting system is complicated. Just finding the appropriate funding source for a research project is daunting, and the application process is even more formidable. But it's worth the effort, says Zohar Ben-Asher, who advises the Copenhagen University Department of Biology on how to apply for and manage EU grants.

- With over 7 billion euros a year, FP7, which is the EU's 7th framework programme for research and development, is the largest grant-awarding system in the world, he says. Zohar Ben-Asher lists some of the many possible granting areas for researchers in the life sciences.

- For biotechnology researchers, there's some 1 billion euros a year for health and life sciences, and additional money for projects in food, agriculture, fisheries and biotechnology. There are dedicated grants for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), because the EU rightly believes this segment should be encouraged, as a great deal of the economy depends on them. There's money for scientific infrastructure, and the Marie Curie people programs have funds to encourage junior and senior scientists to go abroad, to create networks for research and training, and for accomplishing research endeavours.

Getting started

To find an appropriate EU funding source, Zohar Ben-Asher suggests starting with the EU's CORDIS website. Since this can be demanding and time-consuming, he suggests working with an expert, just like you would hire a lawyer for legal advice, or an accountant to help with your tax issues.

- A consultant can translate your project into the presentation style that is expected by the reviewers.

People are afraid of getting into an EU project, because they think the bureaucracy is a barrier and it's too much hassle. They are afraid of building a large consortium and think the chances of getting funding are slim, but if you work with someone who knows the material, it's not that intimidating. Get someone who knows the process, and it will make your life easier and it will be worth the investment, says Zohar Ben-Asher.

As a consultant himself, he suggests checking with the government for assistance.

- In Denmark, and possibly in other countries, the Ministry of Innovation provides help for organizing and preparing applications, and may cover the cost of consultants.

Just applying can be beneficial, according to Nanna Rosenfeldt, Advisor for European Affairs at Danish Business Research Academy (Danmarks Erhvervsforsknings Akademi), a think tank that promotes research and education to make Danish companies more competitive in the globalized economy.

- Being part of an EU project is a great way to

get new contacts. Even if you don't get the funding, you will have established a network that is useful for the next round of work programs and calls, or for other funding and business opportunities.

Another benefit is simply increasing awareness of your field, says Nanna Rosenfeldt.

- I tell clients if they want to influence research policy in the EU, they have to take part.

Collaborate and disseminate

Both consultants say collaboration is absolutely required for a successful EU grant application. The collaboration should cross borders between countries, and also between research and business.

- One thing that is highly encouraged is the creation of a consortium containing a variety of entities with complementary skills, like hospitals, universities, non-governmental organizations, companies, and industries, says Zohar Ben-Asher.

- There are 27 member states plus some associated states, and the EU encourages a well-balanced, non-homogenous consortium with scientists from various countries, with participants from both old member states and new member states, and from northern and southern countries.

Nanna Rosenfeldt agrees, suggesting that applicants find collaborators within their home country and abroad, and across the spectrum in basic and applied research. She points out that working with local researchers can reduce competition from within your own country, and that coordinating with others on EU grant applications can minimize the resources and the energy spent on writing a proposal.

- Build a strong network with partners from different countries and from universities, research institutions and companies, she advises. Spend time at relevant international conferences.

Besides innovative research, a successful grant needs to promote EU values, like encouraging the participation of women and minorities. Consider the social impact, suggests Ben-Asher, for example how a drug delivery system will benefit society, and what kind of economic impact the project will have. Include a dissemination plan about how the project results will be made available to the public, or how they will lead to new technologies, products or services.

- The project must be richer than mere science, he says.

Congratulations! Now what?

- After an EU grant is awarded, you must comply with all the European Commission deadlines concerning results and budgets. You have to be very structured during the whole process, so the project stays in line, says Nanna Rosenfeldt.

Zohar Ben-Asher recommends hiring a



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Resource Website

EU Cordis: www.cordis.europa.eu/home_en.html

project manager to handle the bureaucracy and to keep track of when results need to be delivered, and in what form.

For grants awarded to large, international research consortia, Rosenfeldt also advises patience, saying,

- You will surely experience frustration from the cultural diversity, both from the different nationalities, but also from the different ways of working in universities and companies.

Don't be intimidated, though. The Nordic countries have a good track record in EU funding. In 2008, Nanna Rosenfeldt and others called for more Danish participation in the FP7 programmes, in part to raise the profile of research in the Medicon Valley region. Scandinavian countries are now among the leaders in securing EU funding. Per capita, in 2009, the most successful countries in securing FP7 funding were Finland, Switzerland, Sweden and Denmark.

- Universities, individual researchers, and companies have been focusing on external and international funding. They realize more and more that they must think outside of Denmark to ensure their competitiveness, ends Nanna Rosenfeldt.

Getting and managing an EU grant means thinking globally, collaborating, getting professional assistance, and having patience. The EU granting structure is complex, and assembling a diverse, international consortium isn't easy, but the rewards of an FP7 grant are worth it.

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