



Expert Help

(May 23rd, 2017) The European Science Foundation launched an expert services division called Science Connect last month. Lab Times got in touch with Jean-Claude Worms, the ESF Chief Executive to learn more about this division and the services they offer.

[Science Connect](#), launched on 3rd April 2017 in Strasbourg, is positioned to support the European research landscape by providing expert services in, for instance, peer-review, scientific project management, evaluation and career planning. What does this mean in more detail? According to Jean-Claude Worms (pictured), “Science Connect bridges services, knowledge and expertise, and research entities with the needs of partners and customers. We do this by making use of ESF’s experience in evaluating, funding and managing research programmes and networks in the last four decades. For instance with peer-review, decision-makers need high-quality and independent processes to help them select projects according to their scientific quality, potential, economic value, societal relevance, among other criteria. We provide the platform for those needs.”

These services will be available to member organisations, partners and clients of the ESF. Worms clarifies, “The ‘client’ denomination would apply to any entity, public or private, that wishes to avail of our services, billed at cost. Public entities can be Universities, supra-national agencies, etc. Private entities can refer to charities or private foundations, supporting basic research, e.g. the AXA Research Fund or the Compañia di San Paolo. Partners are scientific institutions or companies that participate with ESF-Science Connect in joint proposals or projects. This can be the case for EU-funded projects, for which we assemble consortia, or projects supported by other entities, e.g. ESA.”



The ESF Chief Executive has ambitious plans for Science Connect. “In the short-term, we aim at becoming the premier provider of independent science support services in Europe. This goal relies on our scientific network and our ability to offer our partners the highest standard in scientific services. By developing these services, we continue to support collaborative research and construction of the European Research Area. In the mid- to longer-term, we believe that science indicators and data are the future of scientific decision-making and science support. We endeavour to

develop an evidence-base wherever possible in the course of our activities, in order to support informed scientific decision-making at the European level,” he reveals.

Thus far, the ESF was synonymous with facilitating Europe-wide scientific networking and project coordination, hence, this change to providing services has us understandably intrigued. Worms elaborates on how this decision came about, “This was the result of a focus

shift by the Research Funding (RFO) and Research Performing Organisations (RPO) that funded the ESF at the time. After a planned merger between ESF and Eurohorcs failed to materialise in 2010 for lack of a common approach on the methodology, our Member Organisations decided to wind down the ESF operations, i.e. the cross-border collaborative research instruments were funding at the time. RFOs and RPOs established in parallel a new entity in Brussels (Science Europe), dealing with science policy only. A period ensued during which a number of actors set up a business plan to transform the ESF by making use of the skills and expertise gathered over its four decades of experience in building the European Research Area and setting science agendas for Europe. We convinced the former governance to allow and facilitate this transition, which was finally achieved at a meeting of the ESF annual assembly in November 2015.” He goes on to tell us that this transition, that took five years (2011-2015), involved a “series of challenging tasks”, which, ultimately, laid the basis for a revamped, albeit much reduced in size, organisation with a new remit and new objectives.

Earlier this year, the ESF has also launched a community of experts. Worms shares, “The launch of the ESF Community of Experts was based in large part on the vast network assembled by ESF over the past decades. The thousands of experts, who are part of this Community, play a vital role in sustaining scientific collaboration and supporting excellence in peer-review and in research grant and proposal evaluation. By expanding this network, we want to build links across multiple research fields in Europe and better enable researchers to meet future scientific challenges. Future developments for this community include a forum for experts, wiki page, etc.”

Is the ESF likely to plan a new division, and/or augment the current services it provides in the recent future? “It is in the spirit of our project and the desired outcome of our business plan,” says Worms. “However there are no fixed plans yet for new divisions as we first want to be able to make Science Connect a sustainable enterprise before committing to something else. In terms of services, a first and relatively new development would be to extend the concept of Expert Board/Committee hosting towards the development of, and support to, what we call Virtual Institutes. These are networks or groups of institutions or scientists, who work on thematics that do not currently have a central European base or association but do require a certain level of coordination and secretarial support. ESF-Science Connect could provide that through its expertise in project management and hosting/supporting expert structures in Strasbourg. We are very much supported in that approach by the City of Strasbourg and by the Eurometropole,” he concludes.

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Pictures (2): European Science Foundation

Last Changes: 05.26.2017