

REF 2021: Impact not
assessed at institute level – p4

David Walker Can the social sciences
become meaningful again? – p23

Maths Scotland reviews weighting – p5

UK scientists propose European astrobiology group

British researchers are coordinating a proposal to create a European Astrobiology Institute, despite Brexit.

Nigel Mason, a physicist at the Open University and one of the coordinating scientists of the project, told Research Fortnight that the EAI would be virtual and that it would mirror the NASA Astrobiology Institute.

“The EAI’s aims and objectives will be to act as a forum for European collaborations in astrobiology research, but also with other major players, especially the United States,” he said.

Mason added that the UK was playing a leading role in setting up the institute—an idea that emerged from a Framework 7 project called the European Astrobiology Roadmap. The roadmap led to a white paper published in the International Journal of Astrobiology in 2016, which highlighted the need for a European organisation that could bring together researchers from all astrobiology-related disciplines.

The EAI could provide researchers with support on networking and writing collaborative bids for European Union funding, as well as bilateral schemes jointly funded by agencies in the US and around Europe. Mason

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suggested that the institute could also offer small sums of money for workshops and meetings.

But the proposal to create the EAI predates the UK’s vote to leave the EU. Mason is adamant that Brexit will not stall the project because the EAI would be set up as a “pan-European geography-based organisation rather than as a political entity”.

“There is no reason why the UK could not be a member of the EAI,” he said. “The role of the UK partners is open for a little bit of interpretation, but at least up to March 2019 the regulation is that British organisations can be members of bids and they would certainly be.”

Mason said that the EAI would probably be formed by astrobiology organisations in countries including Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

Preliminary discussions will be held at a meeting of the European Science Foundation in Strasbourg on 8 September, where a steering committee will be established. Mason said the EAI could be launched in 2019.