



Interview with Jean-Claude Worms

We talk Brexit, astronaut aspirations and the difficulties of surfing in a landlocked region

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Jean-Claude Worms joined the European Science Foundation (ESF) in 1994 and has more than 22 years' experience in research management. He has held various positions at the institution including executive scientific secretary for the ESF's Space Sciences Committee and head of the Science Support Office. He previously held academic positions in physics and astronomy at [Pierre and Marie Curie University](#) and the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines. In May, he was appointed the next chief executive of the ESF.

Where and when were you born?

Algiers in 1958.

How has this shaped you?

That's hard to tell without comparative research, but it probably contributed to a feeling of being part of an international crowd, rather than just national – a “citizen-of-the-world” type feeling. This was strengthened by the diversity of places in which I lived afterwards (North and West Africa, southern France, the US, Paris and Alsace).

What do you hope to achieve in your new position?

To rebuild a great organisation that has left a permanent and positive imprint on the European Research Area and its scientists.

The ESF has been going through a transition period, what is the new direction for the foundation?

We have become a unique science services organisation that continues to support the European Research Area and collaborative research. Instead of being able to directly fund cross-border programmes and networks, we are using our core strengths in peer-review, evaluation and project management to support scientists and inform European science stakeholders and decision-makers.

What were your reactions to the UK European Union referendum result from the ESF's standpoint?

A feeling of time and decades-long efforts wasted: history behaves as a pendulum and more favourable times may come back, but what a waste for such a great country! Frankly, the level of (mis)information conveyed by some sections of the media about Europe, its institutions and staff was appalling. At the research level, we will find a way – scientists always collaborate across borders, but it will become more difficult for UK researchers for whom we continue to have the highest esteem as European colleagues.

What can UK science researchers expect in terms of engaging with the rest of Europe in a post-Brexit world?

Researchers are inherently mobile and collaborative, so cooperation and joint projects will of course continue unabated. However, what will most certainly decrease is the possibility for UK scientists to find easy access to, and avail themselves of, EU-funded programmes and infrastructures. It is too early to see how this will happen exactly, but their lives – and those of their colleagues in the rest of the EU – will be made more complicated.

On the flip side, are representatives of the European Research Area worried about the potential problems caused by Brexit?

Naturally! There is an analogy to what happened in 2014 when Switzerland – which had never been a part of the EU – voted in a referendum to introduce quotas for all migrants in Switzerland, which if implemented would infringe on the EU free mobility policy. Turmoil resulted that led to Swiss researchers not being able to continue using framework programme funds. Something similar is bound to take place in the case of the UK, which will cause larger disruptions.

How do you see research evolving in light of changing expectations such as ‘impact’?

I am always a bit concerned about the “commercialisation” of research, if I can use this word. Performance evaluation is a good thing as a matter of principle, but the outcome of basic research is by its very nature unpredictable, both in terms of application domains and of timeline.

If you weren't an academic, what do you think you'd be doing?

Astronaut is really my first pick since I watched Russian and American early pioneers...and then Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin land on the Moon as an 11-year-old kid. Or blues guitar player? Neurosurgeon?

What is the worst thing someone has ever said about your academic work?

That I could not be a researcher – this was during my PhD. I ignored the advice and went on to do some very interesting research for more than 15 years that I think has good value. I then stopped research and became a manager. I like to think that experience can be an asset in my new role.

What advice would you give to your younger self?

Be yourself, no matter what they say. Don't dream it, be it.

What are the best and worst things about your job?

People and people. More seriously, people around me are truly exceptional! But sometimes as a CEO you wish you could dedicate more time to projects and less time to solving individual issues.

What do you do for fun?

I used to surf but it's harder in Alsace. Parachuting and hang-gliding, which I enjoyed very much, have become difficult at my age. Blues music is still an immense thrill. And reading.

What kind of undergraduate were you?

The kind that climbs back through the window if he has been kicked out the door.

What's your most memorable moment at university?

I had many. University is a fantastic moment in one's life. You spend your time learning things while being almost unaccountable for anything. At least this was the case when I was a student.

What project would you undertake if money was no issue?

A space mission to a not-too-distant habitable exoplanet.

If you were the UK higher education minister for a day, what policy would you introduce?

You think they would let me? I am French! And I am decidedly a European. Ask me again when the UK rejoins the EU.

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