

Communicating European Research

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ABSTRACT. Report of two-day meeting in Brussels at the end of October for European representatives from National Rectors' (Vice-Chancellors) Associations and national bodies of Higher Education Communication professionals.

The meeting was arranged by the very helpful Communications team at the European University Association (EUA) and included two days of talks with communications staff from the European Commission Directorate General (DG) for Research and the DG for Communications at three different locations around Brussels, including the Commission's Berlaymont headquarters.

The focus for this – the second such meeting organised by the EUA – was university research and research communications. The EUA, which represents 850 institutions in 46 countries, is anxious to highlight and communicate the importance and value of university research in Europe in the period leading up to decisions on the European Commission's future investment plans and the new Framework Programme.

We are now entering a crucial period to influence the format of the next Framework Programme: key decisions will be taken within the next 18 months, the EUA's Deputy Secretary General, Dr John Smith told us. He said the value of the Framework Programme was immense and the emphasis this time is on the impact of research and its benefits to society (familiar words to UK ears). This, together with greater encouragement of university/business co-operation and enhanced employability & entrepreneurial attitudes of graduates, is where the main focus is expected to be, and these areas give communication professionals to work on in the next 18 months.

Dr Smith, and others in Brussels we met, stressed the importance of new guidelines for "Responsible Partnering" being drawn up by the EUA to encourage an "Open Innovation" model of university-business co-operation. In research and innovation activities, the EUA emphasises that building successful partnerships requires sound project management and improved intellectual property management.

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We were told the ‘Responsible Partnering’ document is due to be published before Christmas and will be:

- a voluntary code of conduct reflecting proven good practices for Industry-Science collaboration
- designed by practitioners
- endorsed by key stakeholders
- supported by key Commissioners.
- Help the goal of ‘Creating an Innovative Europe’¹.

One of the key roles of the EUA is as a lobbyist, representing the interests of European universities, in discussions with the European commission and others involved in the process. The EUA is also interested in working with bodies like HEERA and the European Universities Public Relations and Information Officers’ Association (EUPRIO) to raise public and political understanding of the importance of the research, innovation and enterprise activities carried out by European universities.

The EUA’s agenda also includes explaining mission diversity among different universities and the way institutions are developing distinctive research profiles / regional clustering and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration mechanisms to address 21st century challenges in energy, health and societal changes. EUA is working to demonstrate how universities across Europe are working with business. Calls to contribute case studies to specific EUA projects in this area are advertised through the EUA newsletter and website (*www.eua.be*).

Not surprisingly the EUA and Commission agendas include encouraging greater staff and student mobility across different frontiers. Some of the EUA initiatives related to research and innovation mentioned to us included a project (“DOC-CAREERS”), supported financially by the EC, which deals with “Collaborative Doctoral Education: University-Industry Partnerships for Enhancing Knowledge Exchange”. “The EUA Council for Doctoral Education” is another major attempt in the European context to create a forum similar to the Council of Graduate Schools in the US. Again, more details are available from the EUA.

On the second day, we visited the European Commission Directorate General for Research and heard from Peter Fisch, Head of Unit “Evaluation and Monitoring of Programmes” about the importance of the Framework programmes. The EU programme supporting research is complimentary to what is happening in member states and has an annual budget of billions of

¹ See http://www.eua.be/fileadmin/user_upload/files/Publications/Responsible_Partnering_Guidelines_09.pdf

Euros. The biggest areas that it supports are IT, health, transport, nanotechnology and materials. The main purpose of the Framework Programme is to increase the competitiveness of Europe.

Peter accepted that some elements of the monitoring were complicated and the Commission is attempting to simplify procedures, but it is dealing with public money and must make sure that it is well spent. Two thirds of the Framework Programme money supports collaborative research projects involving at least three partners, he said. The emphasis is on supporting small and medium-sized enterprises and the regions of Europe, but the Framework Programme is not a Fortress Europe approach, and 136 countries are involved. Although the programme stresses the importance of competitiveness, it is the case that industry is a minor partner to universities and research institutes in Framework Programmes, except in the case of nanotechnology and the IT industry.

Michel Claessens, editor-in-chief at the European Commission/DG Research, also addressed us. He said China was becoming a top partner for the European Research Area. He also told us that only 20% of proposals for Framework support were successful and that universities and other partners could increase their success rate of their proposals by having a good communications plan.

Our visit ended by seeing the audiovisual service team at the Commission's headquarters and finding out how the DG/Communications actively promotes research stories and the EU's other activities. The audio visual facilities are quite impressive in the European Commission's multimedia centre. They have their own broadcast service, EPS and EPS+, with many events transmitted live, including press conferences². Euranet was launched last year as the European radio network because it was felt that Europe was not getting a proper look in when it came to news coverage³. They also hope to have a European TV network established shortly.

It was interesting that there seemed to be quite a degree of editorial independence in many of the services which they recommended to us. They welcome feedback from bodies like universities and some higher education institutions are taking the Euranet news feed. The EC is also starting to put some news is put via social media platforms like Twitter⁴. Both these just tweet links to latest press releases and are not really interactive as they don't appear to respond or want a conversation on twitter, etc. But they provide another useful source of European news.

We were told that the European Commission is a decentralised organisation. Different DGs have their own communication departments, and that each Commissioner has their own spokesman. So does the President. This means it sometimes takes a while for a common line to be agreed. This perhaps explains why the EC has been rather slow to use social media as an interactive tool for

² See http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/home/index_en.cfm

³ See their web site <http://www.euranet.eu> for a flavour of what stories they are reporting. Another useful, and pretty independent, source of news can be found at <http://www.presseurop.eu/en>

⁴ See <http://twitter.com/Euranet> and <http://twitter.com/Berlaymont>

communications with the public. The European Commission website is another very useful source of information can be found at <http://ec.europa.eu/> You can sign up for their services at this site which Euronews video clips and so on.