

Career strategies for European PhD students (and later...) (V)

Marie-Curie Actions

After the general overview on the 7th EU framework programme (FP7) in our last issue, we'll now zoom in on the fellowships and grants within the FP7 PEOPLE programme, which are also running under the label Marie-Curie Actions.

In February at the European Research Council (ERC) launch conference in Berlin, the current President of the European Council and German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, announced that 700,000 additional researchers are urgently needed in Europe. This is good news for all of us! However, what is the reality for present European research scientists? More than ten thousand of them will be involved in the 7th framework programme. Just sending them to another European country for one or two years may broaden their mind and add a little bit of colour to their CV but will not necessarily bring about much change in their overall situation. They receive third party funding and are still employed in a non-permanent, short-term position. Once again it is time to consider where the majority of EU money and also most of the successful FP7 fellowship holders will end up. More often than not it's with those people who don't really need it because they are already extensively funded by local or national programmes. This reinforces the status quo, has no long-lasting effects on research infrastructure and prevents necessary changes in national research systems.

Reinforcing the status quo?

The FP7 PEOPLE Programme has a total budget of €4.75 billion or on average €0.68 billion per year, which represents a 50% rise in comparison to FP6. The European Commission claims that the FP7 PEOPLE programme has evolved from "pure mobility actions to a dedicated programme for structuring training, mobility and career development". This sounds good but has yet to be verified in the course of FP7. One major improvement is the intended outsourcing of the PEOPLE programme to a yet-to-be established executive agency. This hopefully may speed up the interaction between all parties involved and improve the response rate to individual questions and problems. Another outsourcing strategy is the COFUND action. This means that a certain amount of cash is given to national or international funding agencies and fellowship organisations with the objective to foster international mobil-

ity according to EC criteria. These funding organisations, such as EMBO, German Research Foundation or International Graduate Schools, will use their established review boards and administrative infrastructure to select the applicants and distribute the money. At the end of the day, everyone involved should benefit. The Commission does not have to deal with the administrative and review burden, the funding body is able to provide more fellowships in times where it is not always easy to fill the cash box and you as an applicant are winning a fellowship funded by the EC without going through the whole EC hassle. Another improvement is the reduction of visa formalities for scientists, which is an EU directive and should be implemented as national law by October 2007. Whether the requirement to have at least 40% female involvement in FP7 projects is feasible and sensible remains a matter of dispute.

Hosts needed

The FP7 PEOPLE programme supports researchers as individuals or as part of a network. In this issue I'd like to focus on individual fellowships and grants. They are listed in Box 1 along with the respective deadlines and allocated budget. There are four types of individual fellowships called Individual-driven fellowships, which are pretty much self-explanatory: Intra-European Fellowships or IEF, International Outgoing Fellowships or IOF, International Incoming Fellowships or IIF, and Industry-Academia Partnerships and Pathways or IAPP. These fellowships follow the "bottom-up approach" in the FP7 vocabulary, which means that you have to look for a project, which is not limited to a scientific topic or



discipline as long as it remains within the thematic areas that are funded by the EU. In addition, you have to find a host laboratory and then write a general application.

Furthermore, there are two types of Marie Curie Grants and for both of these you need to find a host willing to pay your salary. The grants provide some extra cash that can be used either to upgrade your salary or for other expenses associated with your project such as travel, consumables and so on. For European Reintegration Grants (ERG) the requirement is a previous Marie Curie Fellowship of at least 18 months. You receive €15,000 per year for up to three years. If you are from Europe and haven't been working in an EU or Associated Member State for at least three years you may apply for an International Reintegration Grant (IRG). The IRG provides you with a fixed amount of €25,000 per year for two to four years, which is sufficient for a PhD student or a part-time technician and some pipette tips. Two annual calls are planned for grants but you may apply whenever you want and the date mentioned is a cut-off date by which all applications received are forwarded for evaluation.

With the exception of the IAPP funding line, all actions are limited to the so-called "experienced" researcher. This means that a doctoral degree is a pre-requisite. Without a doctorate you need at least four years of full-time research experience. Moreover, in the IAPP action the exchange of technical and management staff between public and private sectors also receives funding. Beyond that there are no age limits for applicants, a provision that is promoted by the EU under "life-long training and career development". Age does only matter with respect to your pay cheque – if you have ten or more years of research experience, your salary increases by one third.

Find a project and a host lab and, of course, consider your nationality and the status of your future host lab with respect to the EU, which could influence the previous choices. If you are a member of one of the current 27 EU Member States or the Associated Member States and want to move



into another Member or Associated State or to an International European Interest Organisation (e.g. CERN, EMBL) – you “just” have to apply for an Intra-European fellowship. For other cases, the initial hurdle is far more complex and there are different participation rules for different fellowships and grants. When the going gets tough, seek help through your National Contact Point at http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/ncp_en.html or the CORDIS helpdesk at <http://helpdesk.cordis.europa.eu>. Whichever you choose, you still have to endure the barrage of information that is associated with your fellowship but if there is nothing yet available, then I suggest taking a look at the work programme, which provides an insight as to what will appear in the final relevant documents. You will find everything available for your fellowship assembled in an information package at <http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/calls>. This package includes the call or announcement for your fellowship with the relevant deadline, work programme, FP7 fact sheets and a most helpful guide for applicants, together with other documents relevant to your fellowship and grant. All in all

expect a couple of hundred pages, which not only your printer has to deal with!

Wading through a lot of pages

There are, as always, some additional points to consider. You may only apply for one Marie Curie action at a time. For example, applying for an Intra-European and an International-Outgoing Fellowship at the same time is not permissible. You have to wait until your proposal has been rejected or you are placed on the reserve list. In addition, you may not apply for an individual fellowship and a grant at the same time. You may, however, send in a proposal for the same fellowship on the next call, if you have not been successful the first time. Furthermore, you may apply for and receive multiple successive fellowships in the course of the framework programme. Be aware that the next call for the same fellowship might be published at a different time in the following year. There might be only one or even two or more calls for the same fellowship or grant each year. In addition, the regulations and requirements for a fellowship or grant application may change

somewhat from call to call and novel fellowship or grant schemes may be implemented later in FP7. Sometimes changes are implemented *after* the call has been published. Therefore, it's imperative to keep an eye permanently on the call sites to ensure that you prepare your application in accordance with the latest guidelines available.

Let me lead you through the application process for an Intra-European Fellowship. Once you have read through the 80 pages of the PEOPLE work programme at least once or twice, as well as waded through the provisional 60 pages of the guide for IEF applicants and spent several hours in the EU cyberspace, don't worry, if you are feeling a tad disorientated! If you are still stumbling over unfamiliar terms in the EC language, such as actions, calls, work programme, eligibility, management costs, overhead, EPSS, MCF, NPC and so on, the online CORDIS Glossary at http://cordis.europa.eu/guidance/glossary_en.html is certainly a helpful reference but not necessarily always up-to-date with respect to FP7. The call identifier is an important reference to remember and state on all correspond-



ence you might have during and after the application. An example is FP-7-PEOPLE-2007-2-1-IEF with August 14, 2007 being the closing date. About 480 fellows will be funded by this call.

Each proposal needs to be submitted via the EPSS, the Commission's Electronic Proposal Submission Service, in order to be evaluated. So the days when you jumped into a car or boarded a plane at the last minute to deliver your proposal in person to the EC in Brussels are gone forever. Additional information on the EPSS is found at http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/epss_en.html. The EPSS should open at least four weeks before any given call's deadline. In order to use it you have to register and this

which is compatible to Adobe Acrobat version 3 or higher, is essential. Part B is limited to a maximum of 25 pages and the size limit is 10 MB. Do not upload the file of your graduation video! The EPSS accepts only a PDF file format. Part B is really hard work! Due to the stiff competition between the proposals, the final acceptance is always an extremely close finish, so each point of the six main topics has to be very carefully addressed. The good thing is that you already know from Annex 2 of the application guideline what score your reviewer is going to award.

Whilst setting-up your proposal you will also be asked to provide up to three referees. Once the referees' names are in

is sent immediately, a short notice confirming receipt and registration of your proposal, and the second, an official receipt, can be expected shortly after the call deadline. Your proposal then has to master three major hurdles. Firstly, the Commission service checks whether your proposal is complete and meets the eligibility criteria of your funding line. Secondly, your proposal is evaluated by peer-review. At least three reviewers independently score each proposal against 5 major criteria, the weighting of each point specific to the IEF is given in% as follows: scientific/technological quality (25%), training (15%), researcher (25%), implementation (15%) and impact (20%). I won't go into the 20 plus sub-criteria which are to be found in Annex 2 of the guide for applicants, although they are important for you, since it lists what has to be checked off by the reviewers. As with other fellowship or grant applications the reviewers pick through your scientific life, your host lab and host institution and through your research project with a fine-tooth comb and foresee the merit, outcome and impact of your project for your further career and its contribution to European excellence. The reviewers provide the Commission with their scores and comments. Proposals attaining at least 70% of all possible points are further discussed at the so-called consensus meeting. Here the reviewers sit together, discuss each proposal and produce a consensus report, which contains the final score and additional comments on possible improvements and ethical issues. If they fail to settle, up to three additional reviewers will score your proposal again and if this is still not enough a majority report is written.

FP7 People programme – The Marie Curie Actions

	Submission Deadline	Call Budget
▶ Intra-European Fellowship (IEF)	14 Aug. 2007	€ 72 Mio.
▶ International-Outgoing Fellowship (IOF)	14 Aug. 2007	€ 24 Mio.
▶ International-Incoming Fellowships (IIF)	14 Aug. 2007	€ 24 Mio.
▶ Industry-Academia Partnerships and Pathways (IAPP)	31 May 2007	€ 38.4 Mio.
▶ European Return Grant (ERG)	25 Apr./17 Oct. 2007	€ 9.5 Mio.
▶ International Return Grant (IRG)	25 Apr./17 Oct. 2007	€ 14.5 Mio.

is restricted to only one user id and one password per proposal. You may login as often as you like and change your proposal by overwriting the old version, right up until the last minute. Do not wait until the last minute to press the "SUBMIT" button! If there are any technical problems at your end you are out of the running. Shit happens! However, should a failure occur on the last day in the EPSS system on the Commission's site, then each applicant (coordinator) will receive an email granting a 24-hour extension.

Make yourself coordinator

Each proposal has two parts: part A and part B. Part A is completed online after login and consists of four parts. A1: Information on the proposal, A2: Information on the host organisation, A3: Information on the Researcher, and A4: Funding request. The application guidelines provide comments to all points for completion. In these guidelines you will also find samples of the forms for part A, similar to those which have to be completed at a later stage online, so you can play around before the EPSS for your call is officially running and get external help via mail or phone should you lose your way. The forms for part B have to be downloaded, filled out and uploaded again as a single PDF file, so PDF generating software,

the system, they will be sent an email with a unique user id and password, through which they will be able to provide their reference letters up until the call deadline. As soon as the mail is sent to the referees, the coordinator is informed simultaneously and should immediately double-check whether the mails from the Commission actually got through to the referees or ended up in the rubbish bin.

One final recommendation is to appoint yourself proposal Coordinator. In this way you become the single contact point for the Commission in all communications related to your proposal, you will be informed of all details and able to intervene if things are running too slowly or in the wrong direction. Your new boss at the host lab may be too busy to screen all the emails from the Commission in a timely manner.

Be aware that it is not enough just to fill out part A and upload part B. You have to press the "SUBMIT" button! Otherwise the proposal will not be registered with the Commission and might just as well not have been written! Of course, if you want to make further corrections before the deadline you can do so as often as you like but you must remember to press "SUBMIT" after each update.

After submitting your proposal you will receive two emails from the EPSS. The first

Still obstacles after positive evaluation

The next step is the panel meeting. There are eight panels each made up of reviewers from one of the eight major scientific disciplines, under which all applications are classified, e.g. Life Sciences, Chemistry, Physics... They primarily rank all applications and give recommendations for funding. At this stage the Coordinator of each proposal receives a letter with the initial outcome of the evaluation and procedures to follow if he is not satisfied with the outcome. Even if your evaluation was favourable at this stage, your funding is still not guaranteed. Next the Commission draws up a final, ranked list of proposals nominated to receive funding depending on the available budget. At this stage all applicants receive an official letter. A negative decision

is substantiated by an explanation for non-funding. If placed on the reserve list, you have to wait until money becomes available for your funding. A positive response will invite you to commence contract negotiations with the Commission.

Patience required

The third and final obstacle to success is the negotiation and selection phase. The aim of this phase is a final contract where all scientific, financial and legal aspects of your proposal are covered and where all the reviewers' comments are incorporated. You have to fill out additional contract preparation forms and probably rewrite parts of your scientific work description. You and your Host will also have to produce a so-called Personal Career Development Plan, which describes your training needs and the activities of your Host to meet them. At this stage the Commission decides whether all points have been sufficiently addressed, if not, your proposal will be rejected.

What comes next is the signature of the grant agreements between Host and Commission and between Host and Researcher. After your host institution receives the first payment you may finally start your work. How long does this procedure take? The application guidelines outline the life cycle of a typical IEF. On average four months are scheduled for evaluation and about six months for negotiation and contract preparation. If you have to fight for a better evaluation or wish to dispute minute details in the final contract, if documents get lost somewhere or the administration at your host institution becomes a sticking point, it could even take more than a year. If you want to know what happens when a series of accidents occur you can read Sergiu Moroiu's story entitled, "A Trap to Avoid: The Incredible Story of my Marie Curie European Reintegration Grant" at <http://www.imar.ro/%7Esergium/erg.html>. Despite being a good read, this is much too long for researchers on short-term contracts. You may need an additional grant to bridge the indefinite wait or combine fellowships such as the EMBO long-term fellowship with a year of a Marie Curie fellowship.

The pay cheque and future obligations

Congratulations! You have started your EU project and eagerly await your first pay cheque. Since the table I wrote for the last issue somehow disappeared during the editorial process, I would like to enlighten you this time on what to expect. As a Researcher

with four to ten years research experience you will get a salary of €52,000 per year on a full social security contract before taxes and €26,900 per year on a fellowship with minimum social security coverage. If you have more than ten years experience this increases to €78,000 or €38,000, respectively. If you have to move between countries you will be paid an additional €500 without and €800 with family per month. All numbers have to be calculated by applying the EU correction factor that is specific to your host country and which is found in Annex 3 of the PEOPLE work programme. For example, Germany's factor is 1.015, Switzerland 1.163 and Poland 0.716. Additional allowances depend on your type of fellowship and type of research and may at least partially cover your travel, research expenses and attendance at meetings.

The chances of success

In an on-going project paid maternity/parental leave is possible as well as part-time work for family or other personal reasons upon prior approval from the Commission. Roughly 70% of your fellowship time has to be served at your host institution, if not specified differently in the final proposal and grant agreement. If this is NOT the case, you must first ask the Commission for permission. Along with the money additional obligations arise. You are required to write an intermediate and a final report, are obliged to disseminate your research results and you have to be at the Commission's disposal if necessary to career follow-ups.

Unfortunately, the EU doesn't publish too many statistics. It naturally follows and is often the case that a EU programme is already deemed a success story if the money has been completely exhausted and the EU Commissioner is able to ask for a rise in the next round. You might find some estimates pertaining to individual fellowships but these aren't particularly helpful. For example, the success rates for an Incoming International Fellowship were 15.6% in 2003, 13.8% in 2004 and 22.7% in 2005. These numbers could be totally different for the FP7 and it does not make any sense to calculate whether your chances are greater in the beginning, middle or the end of FP7. The Marie-Curie fellowships have been more aggressively advertised over the last years but there has also been a massive increase in the number of fellowships for FP7. Although I am no prophet, I would say the chances of you getting a fellowship this time are quite high. So take it, if you really need it!

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