

ERA-Chemistry's Open Initiative

A new funding instrument of national European research funding agencies in the field of Chemistry

The idea of the Open Initiative

Excellent researchers are creative researchers, who need a maximum of freedom in order to preserve their creativity. Ideally, creativity should not be bonded to strategic considerations. The Open Initiative is an attempt to approach this ideal as closely as possible.

The general philosophy of the Open Initiative is to enable every researcher in Europe to choose his or her subject of research by him/herself and to choose his or her best cooperation Partner(s), independent of the national affiliation. Such joint investigator-driven project proposals should be accepted at any time by the national research funding organisations concerned, independent of deadlines, and should be jointly processed and decided.

ERA-Chemistry is convinced that such an initiative is closing a gap in the market. Almost every European research funding organisation has programmes to fund unilateral undisclosed projects, also in cooperation with other domestic partner organisations. However, a trans-border cooperation is usually not possible if the countries do not have specific agreements in place. Even if agreements are in existence, such transnational proposals are very often not reviewed and sometimes not decided jointly between the respective research councils. The EC and the ESF enable funding of transnational projects, however, except for only very few cases, existing programmes are always focused on specific topics and involve large consortia. National European research funding agencies have not generally accepted instruments to process small transnational bi- or trilateral proposals for collaborative projects. The same is true for the newly established European Research Council. This is exactly the gap which is filled by the Open Initiative of ERA-Chemistry; it is implemented without any supranational organisation, but solely between the national research funding agencies involved.

Practical realisation of the Open Initiative

The Open Initiative is based on a Memorandum of Understanding, valid for one campaign, between the Partner research funding agencies involved. Accession and egression is always possible after the actual campaign. This procedure is a useful alternative to negotiating bilateral contracts with any conceivable European Partner and enables to jointly process proposals following joint procedures, which have been developed on experience and best practice gained in the European research funding organisations involved.

DFG (Germany) and FWF (Austria) are responsible for the secretariat, supported by IRCSET (Ireland) and OTKA (Hungary). OTKA is responsible for the technical implementation, comprising development and maintenance of the electronic system for processing proposals. At the moment (status is end of 2009), the following Partners participate by providing funds for at least one project within

the Open Initiative: DFG, FWF, IRCSET, OTKA, MICINN (Spain), FNRS (Belgium), and MEC (Poland).

The secretariat surveys the process of the Open Initiative, in order to improve the procedure, taking into account new findings and best practice. These findings are expanded into the Memorandum of Understanding for the next Open Initiative campaign.

The Memorandum of Understanding contains a detailed description of the application, review, decision and funding procedures as well as a time schedule. The review procedure follows internationally recognised rules. Main criterion and absolute condition is the scientific quality of the proposed work and the potential of the applicants. The main policy of the decision process is the involvement only of the Partners concerned by the proposal. The decision on the proposal should be based on external peer reviews and should be taken in consensus. If a consensus on funding of a project cannot be reached, the project must be declined by all involved Partners; unilateral funding is not permitted. The Partners fund only their successful national applicants; no money crosses borders. The time span from announcement to decision is aimed to be less than one year.

Approximate timeline:

December: Signature of Memorandum of Understanding
January: Announcement
March: Deadline for pre-proposals
June: Decision on pre-proposals
Late July: Deadline for submission of full proposals
November: Decision on full proposals

Content of a proposal:

1. What is the question that this proposal addresses?
2. Why is this problem significant?
3. How will the question be addressed?
4. What is your recent record of accomplishment in research that would suggest you can achieve success in addressing this problem, and why do you think you and your collaborators are a particularly effective group to tackle this proposal?
5. What is the expected added value to the applicants' cooperation in this trans-national proposal over and above what could be achieved individually?

Questions to reviewers:

1. Applicants:

Scientific background, CV, track record, quality of publications and capability for independent scientific work of all applicants in relation to their scientific age.

2. Research Proposal:

Originality and novelty of the idea, ground-breaking character and scientific impact of research subject, added value of cooperation.

3. Feasibility of the project:

Feasibility of the work plan, risk involved, choice of methods, tools, instrumentation, capability of the applicants' institutions to provide scientific infrastructure for their proposed research.

Open Initiative campaigns

The first Open Initiative ran in 2008.

- 97 pre-proposals were received by 7 participating Partner research funding agencies.
- 41 pre-proposals were invited for the full proposal stage.
- 10 of the full proposals are funded.

In 2009, the second Open Initiative campaign currently running. Once again, seven Partner research funding agencies are involved. Results are expected soon.

Currently, the Memorandum of Understanding for the 2010 Open Initiative is ready for signature.

Characteristics of the Open Initiative

- „Hop-on-hop-off“-principle by annual MOU's
- No common pot, no money crosses borders, only national applicants funded
- Each Partner determines budget independently, no negotiations, no hard obligations
- Filtering of number of proposals by strict pre-proposal evaluation process
- Review process always under national control

Questions and comments

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