



## Final Scientific Report

### BESTPRAC Short Term Scientific Mission (STSM)

Group STSM to Flanders

3-6 October 2016



Vrije  
Universiteit  
Brussel



**Submitted by:**

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## **Acknowledgement**

A big thank you to the EU COST-BESTPRAC Network for providing the funding for this STSM. I am also very grateful to the three host universities VUB, Ghent University and KU Leuven for organising a very packed and very informative 4 days in Belgium. I thank all the speakers for their very useful insights and for openly sharing their best practices in managing EU research funding.

## **Summary**

A Group STSM was organised by three host universities in the Flanders area of Belgium- VUB, Ghent University and KU Leuven on the 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> October 2016. The preliminary agenda topics appealed to me and which I deemed beneficial to my department and UCL as a whole. This STSM has 4 specific aims which contributes to the overall policy and objectives of the BESTPRAC Network including:

- a) to exchange knowledge and skills relating to research administration and project management with the Host Universities and the other STSM participants;
- b) to share specific knowledge and skills on supporting large multi-partner collaborative projects and intercultural communication strategies;
- c) to exchange ideas and best practices relating to staff training and development provisions for research support staff; and
- d) to expand my network of European research administrators and managers colleagues.

The three universities VUB, KU Leuven and UGhent are all different in terms of size, structure and the amount of their research income. However, they do have similarities in terms of the dedicated, effective and efficient support that the research support staff in their corresponding European research offices provide to academics and researchers. Because of this very effective support, their university's EU research income has increased over the last few years and they have gained the trust and confidence of their academic and research colleagues.

## **Background to the STSM**

The Voice of Research Administrators - Building a Network of Administrative Excellence (BESTPRAC) is a European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) initiative which aims to "advance the state of the art in excellent administration of transnational research projects by creating a network of research administrators" (COST, 2016). One of BESTPRAC's activities is the Short Term Scientific Missions (STSM) which supports mobility of research administrators in order to strengthen the existing networks and foster collaborations by allowing individual staff members to visit an institution based in eligible COST-country (BESTPRAC, 2016).

A Group STSM was organised by 3 host universities in the Flanders area of Belgium- VUB (Free University Brussels), Ghent University and KU Leuven on the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> October 2016. The proposed agenda topics very much appealed to me and would be beneficial to my department and UCL as a whole. Our department, the UCL Institute for Global Health (IGH) collaborates with Ghent University in 2 FP7 projects and I have planned to meet the project team personally as part of the visit. In April 2016, IGH appointed a new Head of Department and he is very keen to increase our EU research funding within the next few years. I wanted to find out from the three host institutions their strategies in terms of scoping of funding opportunities, targeted approach in providing support to individual researchers and peer review processes of applications. I coordinate the UCL Research Support Network- with 230 research administrators and managers staff members from across the university. One of the activities of the RSN is to work closely with the staff development office in

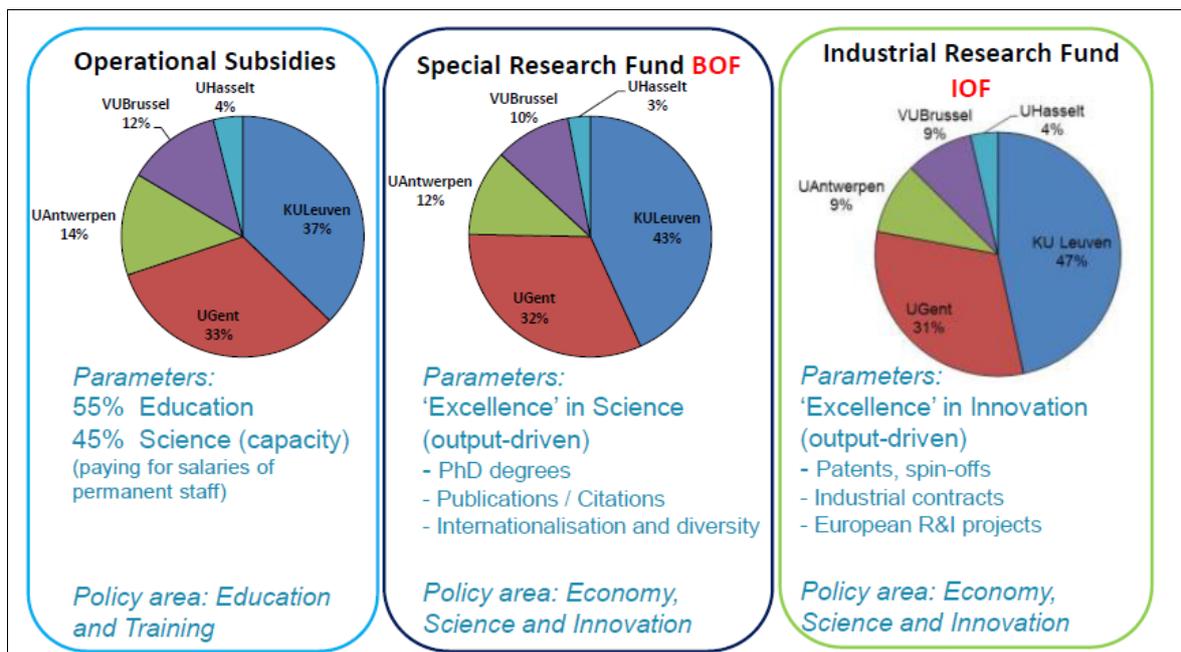
offering relevant training courses to its members. I am keen to find out from the host institutions their provisions for staff training and how they go about effectively delivering these courses.

Moreover, I would also like to share my knowledge and skills particularly in working with large collaborative and multi-country projects. I previously received bursaries from the Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA) and Erasmus Staff Mobility to develop a good practice guide for lead institutions in helping partners especially those based in developing countries in building their financial capacity. I would also like to share practical tips to research administrators in terms of developing their career in the higher education sector. Finally, I would also like to share practical tips in relation to effective intercultural communications strategies, which I originally presented at a BESTPRAC short training course in a form of a short video.

## **Day 1- Visit to the UK Research Office (UKRO), Brussels**

On the first day of the STSM, we visited the UK Research Office (UKRO) in their Brussels office. UKRO is the European office of the UK Research Councils. It delivers a subscription-based advisory service for research organisations (in the main UK HEIs) and provides National Contact Point services on behalf of the UK Government. UKRO's mission is to maximise UK engagement in EU-funded research, innovation and higher education activities.

The day started with an overview of how research funds are managed and distributed amongst the 5 universities in the Flanders Region and this is summarised in the figure below:



Alexandra Berry from UKRO presented some latest developments in H2020 and she also clarified the UK's position post EU Referendum (Brexit) results which has been summary in the text below:

***UK Treasury Guarantees EU Funding for UK Researchers Beyond the Date UK Leaves the EU***  
*"The UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Hammond, and the UK Treasury, have released a [statement](#) confirming that EU funding will be guaranteed beyond the date the UK leaves the EU. The statement provides assurance that "where UK organisations bid directly to the European Commission on a competitive basis for EU funding projects while we are still a member of the EU, for example universities participating in Horizon 2020, the Treasury will*

*underwrite the payments of such awards, even when specific projects continue beyond the UK's departure from the EU". It was also reiterated that British universities and research organisations should therefore continue to apply for EU funding through mechanisms such as Horizon 2020 while the UK remains a member of the EU." (UKRO, 2016)*

We also had a very interesting visit to the Parlamentarium, the European Parliament Visitors' Centre. The Parlamentarium is a dynamic and interactive by design and the exhibit provided explanation of the path towards European integration, how the European Parliament works and what its Members are doing to meet the challenges of today.

## **Day 2- Visit to Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)**

On the second day of the STSM, we visited VUB, a Dutch-speaking university in Brussels. Nik Claesen Coordinator of the European Liaison Office (ELO) provided very useful background of how his department support European research grants (core business H2020) at VUB from the earliest support possible during proposal application stage up to finalising the grant agreement.

### **Summary of the presentations**

VUB currently holds 49 succesful H2020 projects (15 coordinator projects of which 7 are ERC or MSCA IF). Stien Mommaerts provided her very useful insight for an early career research administrator joining the ELO team. Philippe Westbroek , the ELO Knowledge & Technology Transfer Interface then gave a detailed presentation on what specific type of support is provided at ELO including: providing general advice specifically with regards to H2020; providng tailor- made advice with regards to strategic and long term approach in EU research funding; advising on rules and regulation relating to all EU research funding; organising proposal writing courses and coaching sessions; advising and proofreading of proposals; advising and checking of budgetary details; supporting Pis with issues encountered with online submission tool; analysis ESR data; and organising mock interviews. Elger Vercayie, the ELO legal officer gave very useful introduction of what to look out for in consortium agreements and IPR for those who work in research support but with no legal background. Kim Coppens EU financial officer at the VUB Financial Department, shared her best practices in the financial management of EU-projects. It was also very useful to hear from Jozefien De Marrée, Coordinator of a succesful H2020 project of her very positive experience of working closely with the ELO Team from proposal development, project set up and project implementation.

### **Lessons Learned and Best Practices**

I very much admire the hands-on, dedicated and efficient support that the ELO Team provides to the academic and researchers in all aspect relating to EU research funding especially H2020 funding schemes. This type of support currently works perfectly as VUB has been succesful in securing funding. However, as more and more academics and researchers become interested in participating in H2020 funding schemes, there is a need to review the services the ELO team provides as manpower becomes an increasingly big issue and the service that they provide might be compromised. I also very much like the internal funds that they provide to support the proposal writing process which is a great investment to increase submissions.

## **Day 3- Visit to Katholieke University (KU) Leuven**

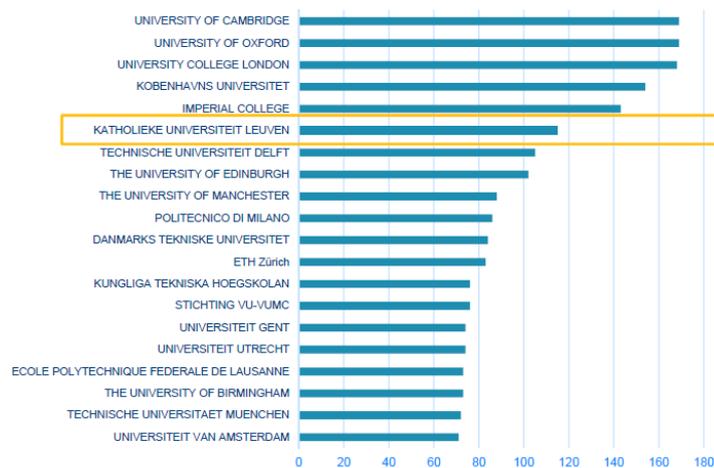
### **Summary of the presentations**

Isel Van der Plancken EU Research Affairs Advisor at the Research Coordination Office provided an introduction to KU Leuven and its research policy and general structure of the university's Grant Office and EU support team and the services it provides. KU Leuven has been selected the EU's most innovative university. It currently has 148 H2020 projects and receives a big chunk of its income from License Fees worth 100M Euros in 2015. KU Leuven owes this success on the following strategies that they have employed over the last few years:

1. Using internal funds as leverage- a bottom up, open competition and internationally peer reviewed and with no specific thematic allocation.
2. A push towards intersectoral collaboration- working closely with Technology Transfer office.
3. Appointment of 'Knowledge Brokers' with EU project participation included in their job descriptions.
4. Creating critical mass by becoming influencers in relevant networks across the EU.
5. Establishing a dynamic EU research support team

Patricia Pardon, head Project & Budget Administration provided an overview of KU Leuven's financial procedures and IT tools, EU financial reporting, auditing procedures and Myriam Witvrouw, European Research Advisor at the KU Leuven Research & Development (LRD), provided a very useful introduction to the Tech Transfer Office, the EU support unit and its services, pre- and post-award European project support to researchers, grant preparation, project management, consortium agreement and legal issues. KU Leuven is ranked 6<sup>th</sup> top performing university in H2020.

## KU Leuven in Horizon 2020 (HEI ranking)



bron: CORDIS, cijfers 05/2016



### Lessons Learned and Best Practices

I am very impressed with the strategies that KU Leuven had successfully implemented over the last few years to increase their EU funding and they are certainly reaping the rewards as they are currently ranked 6<sup>th</sup> top performing university in H2020. In particular, the appointment of 'Knowledge Brokers' which specifically requires them to participate in EU projects is a very successful strategy. Furthermore, the strategic use of financial incentives given to academics and researchers during proposal application stage is also a definite success. KU Leuven is also benefiting largely with the income that they receive from license fees which gained them the accolade of being

the most innovative university in Europe. I also like what they are doing to increase participation in the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) area wherein they have identified that they need to provide dynamic and directed support and they have set-up interdisciplinary research areas for KU Leuven researchers to work together, tailor made information focusing on SSH topics.

## **Day 4- Visit to Ghent University**

### **Summary of the presentations**

Margo Baele, the European Research Advisor at the European Research Office (ERO) provided a brief overview of UGhent's European research funding strategy and incentive schemes to academics and researchers and she also talked about the different training courses that they are offering to researchers. UGhent currently has 123 H2020 projects. Within the EU office, they 2 staff looking after the EU public affairs. They are tasked to keep abreast of the latest developments in EU research funding policy and disseminating this information to the UGhent community. They also advise on participation to the relevant EU research platforms and actively participating in EU decision-making processes. Katrien Windels, Financial Officer at the European Research Office then discussed H2020 on the financial administration and different reporting issues that she has encountered so far with regards to H2020 grants. Dirk De Craemer, Head of the Research Coordination Office also gave a short background on research policy of Ghent University and in the afternoon we visited the university's technology park. Ingrid Merchiers, Business Development Fund advisor at the TechTransfer Office gave a presentation on the Business Development Centers UGhent and their roles in the industrial liaison network. Finally we had an interesting visit to Prof. Nele De Belie at the Magnel Laboratory for Concrete Research Practical and we heard her experiences in coordinating FP7 and H2020 projects throughout the lifetime of her grants, and how she values the support that the European Research Office provides. The visit to her laboratory and seeing in my own eyes the actual experiments was very informative.

### **Lessons Learned and Best Practices**

I very much like UGhent's strategy to get more researchers involved in EU projects through dissemination activities such as newsletters and information sessions on introduction to H2020 funding for new staff. I also think that the strategy of the ERO to partly fund a Project Manager who works in the academic's laboratory is very effective in the practical level and also ensures that their knowledge on managing EU funding remains in ERO.

## **Conclusions**

The three universities VUB, KU Leuven and UGhent are all different in terms of size, structure and the amount of their research income. However, they do have similarities in terms of the dedicated, effective and efficient support that the research support staff in their corresponding European research offices provide to academics and researchers. Because of this very effective support, their university's EU research income has increased over the last few years and they have gained the trust and confidence of their academic and research colleagues.