

## MEETING THE EU TEAM IN KU LEUVEN: STSM OF BARBARA CHIUCCONI

### REPORT

#### *Summary*

Barbara Chiuconi, Early Stage Research Administrator employed at the University of Macerata (Italy), left for a STSM at the EU research grants management offices of Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium). The visit has allowed a remarkable exchange of experiences related to significant financial, legal and administrative aspects concerning EU funded projects, strengthening and expanding to the research support sector the existing collaboration between the two institutions.

#### *Purpose of the STSM*

As indicated in the application, the **University of Macerata** (UniMc), founded in 1290, is one of Italy's oldest universities and it is the only university in Italy that focuses exclusively on socio-economic sciences and humanities.

In the last three years UniMc has been giving a strong boost to a new and dynamic approach to research: interdisciplinarity, internationalisation and attraction of European grants are the key words of this new strategy. In order to face effectively the issues related to the increased number of EU funded projects, a recent reorganization has redesigned the research support system: a decentralised model has been implemented meaning that each department has its own research support office giving support in pre and post award phase and there is also a centralized office (the International research office, whose I am head) which has the responsibility to give advice and support to the department research support units, to promote participation to EU calls, to release practical guidelines related to the project management, to organize training courses, and to do lobbying and networking.

Moreover, another important task of my office is to define effective and efficient work flows among the centralized offices (including Human Resources, Legal and Financial sectors) and the department research support offices. Last but not least, I am directly involved, as project manager, in the coordination of several EU project.

As the reorganization is recent, from one hand the research support *staff needs to acquire new competences and skills, while, on the other hand, UniMc would like to learn more about the financial, legal and administrative experience of best practices, such as the **Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU)**.*

The specific aims of this STSM were indeed:

- to exchange financial, legal and administrative experience between the research support offices of KU Leuven and of the University of Macerata, related to the **post award phase** of European projects;
- to share and develop best practices related to the post award phase of European projects

- to strengthen the existing collaboration between KU Leuven and the University of Macerata, widening it to the research support sector. Indeed, an Erasmus students exchange agreement is already on-going between the two institutions, that moreover are running together an “International Program in Applied ethics”.

*Description of the work carried out during the STSM*

During the STSM I had the opportunity to meet several representatives of the KU EU team, more specifically the program of the bilateral meetings was as follows:

23/6/2014

- 9:00 meeting with Stijn Delaurè and Iesl Van der Plancken, International funds unit, Research Coordination Office. Introduction to KU Leuven and general EU team affairs and policy.
- 14:30 meeting with Natalie Van Geel, financial monitoring projects & contracts. Reporting, audits, time sheets.
- 16:00 continuation meeting with Stijn / Iesl

24/6/2014

- 9:00 meeting with Katleen Janssen from EU team at the TTO Leuven Research & Development (LRD)
- 15:30 meeting with An Jansen, YouReCa coordinator (young researchers careers) and Marie Curie actions pre-award coordinator in the EU team.

25/6/2014

- 9:00 meeting with EU team at LRD, short presentation by Barbara Chiuconi and discussion of EU team business.
- 10:00 meeting with Myriam Witvrouw from EU team at LRD, on project support, management and post-award issues.

Here below the minutes of the meetings (drawn up according to the topics to be covered) are reported:

**1. Presentation of KU Leuven, with focus on its research vision and strategy**

Founded in 1425 by a clerical named Papal Bull, the **Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU)** boasts today more than 31,000 students, around 12% of whom are international students from more than 120 nations. In terms of its personnel, there are 5,287 academic staff, 2,730 administrative and technical staff, and 8,172 university hospital staff members. The university comprises fourteen faculties, fifty departments and about 240 sub-departments, organised in 3 “groups” (Humanities and social sciences, Biomedical sciences; Sciences, Engineering and Technologies). Following the Bologna Process, in 2013 KU expanded to include academic degrees hosted in 11 Flemish cities, thus increasing considerably the number of its students (around 100.000) and boosting the economic development across all the Flanders region. As to research, the creation of a multi campus university meant to let each campus find its own specialisation (eg. Brugge campus for marine disciplines).

Today KU is a research-intensive, internationally oriented university with a strongly inter- and multidisciplinary focus: several European surveys rank KU Leuven among the top ten European universities taken into account the number of publications and citations, of 7FP awarded grants and indicators related to the transfer of knowledge. Research expenses in 2013 peaked 418 millions of Euro, among which 21% were internal funds while the remaining 79% came from external funds (253 million from the 7FP). Internal funds are considered indeed a leverage to get external ones.

In KU's vision, research is never an end in itself but it must be useful for society and the development of the territory: it is not a case that KU' transfer of knowledge office - established in 1972 - was one the first office of that kind in Europe and that today almost three quarters of KU researchers have contracts with local companies.

The reasons of KU success can be found in the following aspects:

**a. A bottom up – competition based approach.**

KU governance does not indicate any strategic thematic research line, but uses a bottom-up approach. Any thematic research line can be conducted and funded by the University, once its excellence is proved. However, all the internal research funds are given on a competitive basis<sup>1</sup>. During each year several internal calls for proposals are launched (e.g. according to the size of the projects –small or large) with a total budget of about 70 millions and researchers are “obliged” to apply if they want to get funding and conduct their research. There is a specific office in charge with this activity that usually takes about one year to be completed.

The evaluation phase is particularly difficult: applicants are required to indicate a list of 20 potential referees (with no conflict of interest with the applicant), then the Research council<sup>2</sup> chooses 6 evaluators, verifying that no cooperation or co-authorship have been running by the evaluators with the applicant in the last 5 years.

Evaluators assess remotely - there is no “consensus meeting”- giving a comment and a score; however the final evaluation on the proposal is not the sum of the single evaluation reports (indeed in the future external evaluator will not be required to indicate a score by only a comment). In fact the position of the proposals on the final ranking list is given by the assessment of the Research council members *on the basis* of the above mentioned six related evaluation reports.

The concrete risk that the “same excellent applicants” get every year the funding is avoided with specific rules: indeed if a researcher has been already successful at an internal level and has been already awarded for example with an ERC grant , he/she is “forced” to apply only for external funds. This balance needed to maintain the internal funds as leverage for external ones seems to work: statistics say that 10% of researchers get 40% of funding, but at the same time 60% of researchers get internal funding.

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<sup>1</sup> The unique exception is represented by the just recruited researchers: since it is assumed that their value has been already strictly assessed during the recruitment procedures, they are given a financial support (40.000 Euro) to start to conduct research at KU and to let them the time to “understand the rules” of internal funding.

<sup>2</sup> The Research council is a multidisciplinary panel composed by 26 distinguished researchers who work on a voluntary basis, given the fact that this work is highly reputed and it is also very useful to learn how to write good proposals. It is absolutely independent by any governance body. The role of Research council member usually lasts two years, but it can be postponed for other two.

In conclusion, KU researchers are used to be continuously evaluated: indeed every time they apply for an internal grant their projects, publications, patents, long stays abroad are assessed<sup>3</sup>.

In addition to the assessment of each researchers, also the research activities of each department is evaluated: every 5 years departments elaborate a policy plan (followed by a report) that are evaluated by science groups made of external experts (for example from ERC council). This evaluation is very useful in order to have an external point of view and suggestions. Evaluation is made remotely, but also interviews are conducted. Even in this case non award is given to evaluators.

In conclusion the fact that KU researchers are used to compete at an internal level facilitates them when they compete at EU level.

#### **b. Strategic alliances**

KU is member of several important international and national research networks: among these I would like to mention LERU (League of European Research Universities) whose membership is very helpful in terms of lobbying and exchange of good practices and Vision 2020: the Horizon network thematic clustering & SME, a network aiming at involving universities and SME in participating in Horizon 2020 projects.

#### **c. Industrial research managers**

Recently, thanks to the financial contribution of the Flemish Government, KU recruited 29 industrial research managers. Active in each department, they are a sort of business developers whose aim is to promote cooperation between researchers and the industry sector at any level (not only within the framework of the European projects).

They have a permanent position like professors (therefore it is an appealing position, even if, in case they do not reach their objectives, they can be fired) and usually they are persons coming from a business sector with experience in research field as well. All the 29 industrial research managers meet together monthly, while every two months they have a meeting with KU research support offices.

At the moment no business developer works for SSH departments, since the Flemish Government does not “recognize” the role of social innovation as economic development driver. However KU is pushing in this sense.

#### **d. A dedicated and successful research support structure**

See point 2 below.

## **2. Presentation of KU Leuven EU Team**

Another reason of KU success in attracting EU funding is the fact that a dedicated support team for international research projects has been established, taking care of all the activities related to EU projects (from lobbying activities to the writing of proposal until the management of the project). The main offices involved that forms the EU Team are the Research Coordination Unit (DOC) and the Tech Transfer Office (LRD).

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<sup>3</sup> The application form consists of: summary, project activities, publications, longer stays abroad, project implementation. In the future they are going to make the application form more similar to the EU application forms, eg. including the section related to the impact.

The **Research Coordination Unit** is in charge with the following activities:

- Lobbying
- Networking
- Information and promotion of EU funding opportunities (through bilateral meetings, organisation of training courses and Horizon launch events, newsletter, website and focussed mailing)
- Support in proposal writing (as to work packages, tasks, deliverables, milestones, management and impact sections)
- training, including mock interviews (kind of test of the interviews conducted in ERC evaluation, done at KU with a panel composed by vice rector, experts, former evaluators, a DOC representative).

The **Tech Transfer office** (LRD) is in charge with the following activities related mainly to the post award phases:

- giving advice on proposal as to budget, IPR, exploitation of results.
- giving advice on grant and consortium agreement
- management of the project: project management is usually done by research groups, but when this is not possible, the office takes care of the organisation of project meetings, communication with partners and so on.

**Finance department** is responsible to prepare the financial statements and to pay the invoices related to all the EU grants (there are currently 5 employees specialised in EU funding rules). Therefore we can say that also financial reporting is a centralised activity.

**Legal department:** within the legal department there are 5 persons with expertise on legal issues related to EU projects. Each time that LRD recognizes that there is a legal problem, they are contacted and asked to give a formal advice.

It's important to underline the fact that LRD's main purpose is to promote and support transfer knowledge between university and industry, therefore it is mainly in charge with spin offs and regional development, research collaborations, patents and licenses.

The fact that a transfer knowledge office is embedded in the EU funding support offices is a not very common feature in the European universities' scenario, but it seems to work, having a look at KU's results in terms of European grants and taking into account that about 50% of KU's partners in the EU funded projects are companies, and not research institutions!

Another aspect that impressed me is the fact that the above mentioned offices work jointly and effectively even if – if we have a look at the organisational chart – there is no coordination between them. They simply cooperate, meeting regularly (weekly), having a collaborative approach and above all, sharing the same goal (more submitted proposals and more grants).

As seen, KU's model is a centralized model, except for the daily project management that is implemented by the research groups inside the departments. However, recently, KU has been recruiting specific figures that are active inside the departments - close to researchers - with the purpose of promoting cooperation with industries (business developer) or to improve SSH researchers' capacity of attracting external funding (proposal coach).

Information flow between the above mentioned offices and departments is assured by SAP and by Google Drive that is used to store all the correspondence related to specific projects or proposals. SAP is KU's back office system used for every activity (education, accounting, diffusion of newsletters, library management, open access). It is also used for the financial management of EU projects, for preparing the financial statements, for claiming the costs of a mission, to place an order, to register invoices (also scanned), to fulfil the timesheet.

### 3. Presentation of the University of Macerata (focus on its research vision and strategy)

The **University of Macerata** (UniMc), founded in 1290, is one of Italy's oldest universities. About 11,000 students are enrolled at UniMc, which employs around 600 staff (roughly 300 academic and 300 administrative staff). Unimc is the only university in Italy that focuses exclusively on socio-economic sciences and humanities<sup>4</sup>.

As previously mentioned, in the last three years UniMc has been giving a strong boost to a new and dynamic approach to research: interdisciplinarity, internationalisation and collaboration with industry sector are the key words of this new strategy.

As to *internationalisation*, in the last years Unimc became member of several important international research networks: EUA (European University Association), ECHIC (European Consortium for Humanities Institutes and Centres), EARMA (European Association of Research Managers and Administrators), ECHAlliance (European Connected Health Alliance). Moreover, every year an internal call for proposal is launched to grant a financial contribution to researchers willing to conduct research at a foreign research institution or to attend international events (brokerage events, stakeholder tables).

In order to boost networking among UNIMC researchers, six **Interdisciplinary Research** groups have been created: researchers can join them on a voluntary basis and they are led by a coordinator. Their focus areas have been defined roughly on the basis of *EU societal challenges*. Moreover, for the first time at UNIMC, an internal call for proposal has been launched to fund small interdisciplinary proposals that should be a leverage for participating at Horizon 2020 calls (they have been evaluated by international experts and the application form was similar to EU applications).

Lastly, UniMC firmly believes in the added value that social sciences and humanities bring to the understanding of complex socio-economic and political questions, from a multidisciplinary perspective (indeed, Unimc motto is "Innovation through Humanism").

Innovative solutions are often the result of well-balanced cross-disciplinary approaches; the ability to imagine future developments and to devise intelligent, problem-solving strategies is never simply a matter of adopting and adapting new technologies, therefore UNIMC is developing new and innovative *collaboration with the industry and business sectors*. I would like to mention LUCI (Humanities Laboratory for Creativity and Innovation) aiming at promoting an innovative and entrepreneurial attitude among students, PhD students, graduates in the SSH and to support the creation of innovative business initiatives SSH-driven through the creation of a virtual network/community and of a "real" laboratory.

Although the research fields of the university are only SSH and SSH researchers are commonly not very oriented to collaborative research projects, the first results of the new strategy are quite encouraging: from 2008 to 2013 the number of EU funded projects – even with SMEs in the partnerships - and the amount of received external funds increased significantly.

### 4. Presentation of the research support system in Macerata

In order to face effectively the issues related to the increased number of EU funded projects, a recent reorganization has redesigned the research support system: each department has its own

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<sup>4</sup> The departments are five: Humanities, Law, Political Sciences, Economics and Education Sciences.

research support office giving support in pre and post award phase and there is also a centralized office (the International research office).

The International research office is in charge with doing networking and research marketing (networking, participation at official and brokerage events, preparation of promotional material), with giving information about the funding opportunities (through the website, LinkedIn groups, mailing list) and with training the academic and administrative staff, both with external experts and internal ones.

Support to researchers in drawing the proposal is given by the research support office of the department (concerning the budget, dissemination and management task, the preparation of administrative forms). In case of doubt the research support office asks the International research office for advice.

In case of funding the research support office of the department is in charge with the financial, legal and administrative aspects of the project: even in this case, the International research office offers its support and advice to the departments.

Moreover, another important task of the International research office is to define effective and efficient work flows among the centralized offices (including Human Resources, Legal and Financial sectors) and the department research support offices. It is also responsible for the preparation of correct and updated information (hourly staff cost, registration act, bank account, database of submitted proposals) to be maintained in a shared repository.

#### 5. **Discussion about perception and recognition of the role of research administrator**

The job done by EU team is generally well evaluated by researchers who address EU Team in order to get support, since they realize their added value. Also the fact that a prerequisite to be recruited at EU Team is having a PhD degree helps a lot, since in this way researchers tend to consider research administrators as their peer (often DOC staff members have left the of researchers to join EU team). Generally professors tend to consider EU team's job more positively than post docs do.

6. **Practical administration tools** related to the project management (templates and guidelines) are prepared by the above mentioned offices (DOC and LRD) and are related to proposal writing, eligible costs, financial rules (eligible costs). These documents are usually not approved by a governance body, since they are technical documents. Obviously, they are strictly confidential.

#### 7. **Staff cost**

In proposal phase KU indicates 1596 hours as yearly productive hours of researchers and administrative staff. Since in Belgium there is no contract for professors, integrated timesheets are necessary to give evidence of productive hours in case of audit. Timesheets are fulfilled in SAP: the system avoids registration of hours in holidays, in weekends and every time the daily limit of 7,6 hours is exceeded. Even if the system is automatic, nevertheless a person in charge with the project has to monitor the preparation of timesheets, in order to avoid any inconsistency.

8. **Reporting:** in particular, how to cope with the financial responsibility of the Coordinator in non Framework programme projects.

As previously mentioned the Finance department is in charge with the financial reporting. This activity is done using the same system (SAP) used for the financial management of the project. Once a project starts, a specific line of budget in KU's entire budget is assigned to the project and

inserted in SAP according to the specific cost headings (eg. staff, travel, consumables, equipment, overheads, etc). The added value of this system is the fact that the accounting system is linked to project budget, therefore the project budget is automatically updated and can be easily monitored. For example, if you want to buy a computer with equipment budget line, in SAP you will be able to place the order, register the invoice, register its payment and automatically the budget line equipment will be updated, according to the following table:

Budget line	Project budget	Foreseen cost (on the basis of placed orders eg.	Actual costs incurred	Leaving budget
Staff				
Travel				
Equipment				
other				

The system automatically alerts about irregularities (expenses incurred out of the duration of the project or out of budget).

A recent novelty is the fact that if someone in the department places an order (eg. a pc) in SAP, and someone in the finance department – who of course knows EU rules – realizes that this expense is not eligible, the place will be automatically rejected.

Obviously, SAP is also the basis for the preparation of the financial statements to be submitted to the European Commission.

As to the issue of the financial responsibility of the Coordinator in non Framework programme projects, KU's colleague confirmed that the problem actually exists: sometimes the Commission has cut some costs claimed by KU's partners and in these cases KU issued invoices of the correspondent cut amount. Sometimes the invoice has been paid, sometimes has not. We agreed on the need to monitor the activities of the partners and to distribute the financial contribution according specific deadlines linked to the project results.

9. **Indirect costs** : what does the institution do with, how to deal them, incentives

Taking into account the Horizon 2020 indirect cost percentage rate (25%), indirect costs in KU is distributed in the following way:

- 14% goes to central administration, more specifically:
  1. 7% to pay staff of Tech Transfer Office
  2. 7% to central administration
- 11% goes to the academic staff, more specifically,
  1. 8% to the Principal investigator to conduct other research
  2. 3% to fund projects submitted to the EU Commission that were not funded but were included in the reserve list (with a contribution of 40.000 or 200.000 euro ), or to encourage people to submit a proposal (15.000 euro eg. to hire someone who writes the proposal)

No financial incentives are given directly <sup>i</sup> to the Principal investigators or other researchers involved in the project. This lack of personal incentives is easy to comprehend since the KU research system itself “forces” researchers to compete to get the money needed to conduct research. Researchers know very well that without money they would not be able to conduct research and above all to obtain the excellent research results they need to maintain their prestigious position at KU (most of researchers have a temporary contract). In Italy, recently,

several universities have introduced personal incentives in order to promote participation of researchers at EU call for proposal and attraction of external funds. But we have to admit that the level of competition inside Italian universities is definitely much lower than at KU.

#### **10. Internal approval procedures**

Once received at KU, the grant Agreement is sent to the EU Team, then it is transmitted to the Legal and to Finance departments for any remarks (legal department's remarks are relevant for non EU grants, e.g. for USA grants, for which, actually, if something in the agreement is not ok for KU, this could be modified). Then the grant agreement is signed by the Rector.

Finally, the signed Grant Agreement goes back to the EU team and a project code is immediately created in the system SAP.

#### **11. How to record and track the funded EU projects**

There are no specific data base at KU. DOC manages an excel file including the list of submitted proposals in the Framework Programme that can be easily compared with KU proposals indicated in the Participant Portal. Whereas proposals of other funding programmes are not tracked and recorded.

#### **12. Consortium agreements:**

LRD recommends that the following aspects are always included in the Consortium agreements:

- that KU has a representative with right of vote in decision making bodies of the project
- the statement that every significant change of the project (eg. as to budget and deliverables) must be approved by the legal representative of the partner (not by the Principal Investigator who is usually KU's representative inside the decision making body).

In 7FP projects, pre-financing was usually distributed in the following way:

- 80% at the start of the project
- 20% at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> reporting period, after verifying that everything was ok (reports submitted, and so on)

Indeed, KU realises that partners (especially SMEs) need cash flow in order to start to implement the project.

#### **13. Dissemination and outreach activities**, especially within the Marie Curie Actions

KU team suggests researchers to be more creative as possible; more specifically they suggest the in-going researchers to organise their outreach activities in occasion of the outreach events organised every year by KU.

For example KU organises an event dedicated to children aged 10, a science week targeting adults and comedy events, during which researchers are invited to speak about their research in a funny way.

#### *Contribution to the goals of the Cost targeted network*

- This STSM allowed me to know in depth the EU Team of KU Leuven, setting up very useful relationships and establishing a lasting collaboration with the University of Macerata, thus contributing to foster networking between administrative, finance and legal services of research institutions and universities.
- During the mobility I had the opportunity to share best practices and experience related to financial, legal and administrative aspects of the EU project management, with a special focus on post-award phase. This experience has suggested me practical improvements and changes to be implemented at the research support system of the University of Macerata.

#### *Description of the main results obtained*

- This STSM strengthened the existing collaboration between KU Leuven and the University of Macerata, widening it to the research support sector. The exchange of experience was

mutually beneficial as to SSH research regards. Indeed both universities share the same problems in involving SSH researchers in EU funding opportunities and make SSH researchers cooperate with the business and industry sector. We will keep in touch in order to face this specific challenge and to share knowledge in this field.

- I widened my skills and competences through an exposure to such developed research environment. I had the opportunities to see how a “best practice work”. In several times I was reassured about the goodness of several choices made by our universities (for example as to the integrated timesheet), in other cases I was reassured by the fact that both the universities faces the same problems (for example how to say “no” to researchers).

Nevertheless, what impressed me very much was the winning mentality of the EU TEAM: they are able to cooperate incessantly and work together even if they are not coordinated by the same person or office. They simply cooperate (meeting regularly) for the same reason: having an increasing number of successful applications. That’s all.

Another aspect that hit me mostly was the strict link between the International funds unit and the Tech transfer office. The project cycle (from pre award to post award phase) is distributed among the two offices and sharing of knowledge, information and experience is absolutely beneficial and successful.

I am going to apply this approach in my university, discussing with the other offices (at central and department level) to find the best operational arrangements.

*Confirmation by the host institution of the successful execution of the STSM (see attachment )*

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<sup>i</sup> (i.e. to their personal bank account)