

Report from COST Action: TN1302  
STSM title: Group STSM to Flanders, Belgium  
Reference : ECOST-STSM-TN1302-170116-070222  
STSM dates: from 17-01-2016 to 21-01-2016  
Location: Free University Brussels, Brussels, Belgium  
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## **Summary**

In January 2016, I took part in a group STSM to Flanders, Belgium to visit Free University Brussels, KU Leuven and the University of Ghent. The goal of the mission was to exchange knowledge and practices from EU project preparation and management, as well as broadening the professional networks of early stage administrators. During the STSM, the group was introduced to a variety of topics related to both the pre- and post-award phase of research administration work. Topics that were presented and discussed were incentives and motivation of researchers, ethical, legal and financial management, support track systems and the organization of support services.

My motivation for taking part in this STSM was twofold. Firstly, it was an opportunity to broaden my professional network and learn from my peers at important European institutions. Secondly, attending this STSM would give me unique insight into the research support services of other universities and be able to exchange knowledge and best practices, which I could in turn bring back to my home institution. The STSM has been enriching in many aspects, however, the primary best practice I will bring back to my home institution would be what I learned about incentives. It was very useful to learn how particular incentives are used to encourage and oblige researchers to write and submit proposals. Hearing about this and other practices has been truly inspirational and I am looking forward to exploring how this experience can be used to improve the work at my home institution.

## **Purpose of the STSM**

The purpose of this group STSM was to visit three universities in the Flanders region in Belgium, VUB (Free University Brussels), Ghent University, KU Leuven, to exchange practices and experiences from EU research support and project management. My motivation for taking part in this STSM was twofold. Firstly, I considered it to be a great opportunity to learn from experienced EU advisers at professional universities, which in turn can help me further develop my career as a research administrator and EU adviser. Secondly, I was hoping that I would be able to use the practices and experiences from the STSM in my home institution. I am currently working as an EU adviser at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences in Oslo (HiOA). HiOA is currently strengthening their EU support services and need input on how to best organize these services. By attending this STSM, I wanted to learn how other more experienced universities organize their research support services and be able to exchange knowledge and best practices, which I could bring back to my home institution.

## **Detailed description of the work carried out during the STSM**

The STSM took place in the Flanders region from 17 January to 21 January. It started with a meeting at the UK Research Office (UKRO) in Brussels. The day started with a presentation

of the host institutions and the visiting institutions. Following the lunch break, Alexandra Berry from UKRO presented the state of affairs in H2020, Nik Claesen from VUB gave a presentation on the Participant Portal, Nathalie Vandepitte from UGent gave a presentation on grant management in H2020, and Stijn Delauré from KU Leuven presented some ethical issues and how they have handled these issues at KU Leuven.

The second day, the group traveled to KU Leuven where we had some interesting presentations on the research policy at KU Leuven, the work of the EU support team, financial procedures, how the tech transfer office works, and more details on the ethical committees. The presentations gave us an insight into what services the Grant Office and the EU support team offer.

The third day, the group visited the University of Ghent where we met representatives from the EU office. They introduced their strategy and policy, project support services and financial support services. The UGhent team gave a detailed presentation of their dissemination strategy and their newsletter. We were also invited to another part of the campus where we met two representatives from the Laboratory of Microbial Ecology and Technology (LabMET) who had recently won a European grant.

The fourth and final day, we visited the Vrije Universiteit Brussel in Brussels. Here we had an introduction to how VUB work with legal aspect of EU projects and how VUB works with incentives towards researchers. Nik Claesen also explained VUB's ERC support track, which was very interesting, considering that the institution where I work does not have a programme like that.

### **Contribution to the goals of the COST Targeted Network**

One of the goals of the COST BESTPRAC network is to exchange financial, legal and administrative experience and when I applied for this STSM, I thought that this would be a way for me to learn and exchange knowledge with the host organizations. What I failed to consider was the experience and knowledge from my co-participants. It has been truly enriching to meet research support staff from so many different institutions with versatile experience and ways of organizing their work. The host organizations have facilitated knowledge sharing between the participants in an excellent way and many of the sessions have been more like a dialogue than a lecture which has allowed for exchange of experience.

Another goal of the BESTPRAC network is to establish a network for research administrators. In a network-building perspective, this short-term STSM has been a great success not only on a professional level, but on a personal level as well. It was rewarding to meet new colleagues and make new friends and the STSM group has kept in touch after the completion of the STSM and shared articles, invitation to events, etc.

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

In the following section, I have summarized the main results from the visits at the different universities. What I found most interesting about the visit to KU Leuven, was learning about the stimulation policy and incentive regimes at Leuven. It was very interesting to learn about how they use internal funding strategically to increase the quality and quantity of H2020 proposals, e.g. how a part of the overhead goes to financing parts of projects on the reserve list given that they resubmit/apply again within three years. It was also very interesting to hear

about how the EU support team and the TTO divide the work between them. The TTO support researchers who are in the process of developing a proposal, while the EU support office can be involved prior to this. Furthermore, I learned that KU Leuven do not lobby on a thematic level, but on the structure of H2020. This was very interesting to me because, there are many, partly contradicting, recommendations on how to lobby and position your institution in the EU system. This is something my institution find difficult because we are a small institution in a European sense and since Norway is not a member of the EU, we have little influence on the political decisions in Brussels. It was reassuring to learn that this type of work is not a prerequisite for success in H2020.

What I found most interesting from the stay at Ghent, other than visiting the beautiful city of Ghent, was how the research support office was organized. Many institutions with a research support office have divided the staff into pre- and post-award. However, at UGhent, they had also divided the tasks in the pre-award phase between them in an interesting and original way. They had personnel dedicated to analyzing and disseminating policy news, while others were involved with the actual preparation of proposals etc. This is of particular relevance to me, considering that my institution is considering establishing a type of grant office and the division of labor will one issue that needs to be discussed in connection with this.

At VUB, it was particularly useful for me to learn about the legal aspects of EU projects. In my institution, I have been involved with some legal work, but I do not feel that I know enough about issues central to EU projects such as intellectual property rights and conflict resolution. Elger Vercayie showed us examples of consortium agreements where these issues were solved differently and this is something that I have already been able to use in my institution because we are currently in a grant preparation phase where we need to discuss these issues with our partners.

Other than the immediate use of the knowledge on consortium agreements, my institution will also work to implement some of the incentives that I learned about during this STSM. In my institution, we currently have few internal incentives for the researchers and we are particularly interested in looking into the incentive where a part of the overhead of projects was used strategically to generate new projects. We believe that that could contribute to increasing the number of proposals from our institution.