

Policy matters

Supporting Excellence in the Science Base

Reaching the inner ear of the EC: how scientists lobby for their interests at the European Commission

In 1999, one American university alone spent US\$760,000 on lobbying politicians for funding to improve its science facilities. Boston University was criticized when it contracted a professional lobbying agency, Cassidy & Associates, to do the 'dirty' work. That is how it would be considered in the medieval world of European science politics. Welcome to the arcane, unintuitive and dimly lit labyrinth of the European Commission (EC). While some wander the narrow passageways with no more than a tallow torch to light their way, eventually joining the dusty skeletons, others seem to be friends with its keepers, and know the passwords to the secret rooms.

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Many scientists lament their lack of influence in the EC, and spend years knocking on closed doors; others have rapid success. Two factors appear to play a critical role: how big you are, and who your friends are. Size is important: a scientific organization that represents a large number of members is more attractive to the EC than an individual voice. However, to be effective it must speak with a single voice. Furthermore, basic researchers must become immersed in the economic and social implications of their research and, most importantly, follow the tracks laid out by the EC. This is one side to the Commission. The other is a culture shrouded in mystery, and completely impenetrable to all but the initiated; a world that works on long established, trusted contacts, and a code of respect and honour. It has even been likened to the honour-bound way of the Samurai.

But let us start with size. While academic organizations have fallen far behind in the race to the EC's ears, relative newcomers, such as industry platforms and umbrella organizations,

have overtaken them. Prominent among these are the Animal Cell Technology Industrial Platform (ACTIP) and the European Federation for Pharmaceutical Sciences (EUFEPS). As Hans van den Berg from Akzo Nobel, and Chairman of ACTIP, explained, two channels work particularly well in influencing the policy makers. One is including EC representatives in plenary meetings, at which they are invited to present a status update on the Framework Programme (FP). This provides an opportunity to "feed people with our opinions", as van den Berg put it. The other is writing letters and position papers, which is very effective provided that one knows one's correspondent personally and maintains a dialogue with meetings, visits to Brussels, position papers and a continuous information flow in bite-sized chunks. The support of the European Parliament (EP) can also help because its members are open to receive information on certain topics. However, these contacts in the EP must be cultured, and as van den Berg noted, this is not a professional

lobbying approach as seen in Washington. Nevertheless, ACTIP has provided important input to the EC on the drafting of FPs 4 and 5, and has written several position papers in the run-up to FP 6, emphasizing the importance of basic research.

It is no accident that industry platforms are listened to by the EC. They span the twilight zone that no one really understands, but that most people take for granted, between a spark of genius in a scientist's mind and a development of socio-economic importance. EUFEPS recently hit the jackpot with its position paper *New Safe Medicines Faster*, which was published and submitted to the EC in August 1999. Its title is mirrored almost word for word in the draft of FP 6, which reads "Research will focus on rapid development of safer more effective drugs". As Ole Bjerrum, Vice President of EUFEPS, and Research Counsellor at Novo Nordisk, Denmark, pointed out, "We wanted to collect bottom-up information that could be useful in the drafting of the 6th Framework Programme". But what the EUFEPS experience really shows is that if scientists want to sell their advice to the EC directly, they will have to use the right words, and according to Bjerrum, give something in return, i.e. "part of their working capacity; their brain."

Those who have had success have clearly promoted the 'right' topic, caught the right person at the right time, and were too big to be ignored. Contrast the success of EUFEPS



with that of a smaller academic player such as the European Plant Science Organization (EPSO), which has found it harder to find fertile ground for its suggestions. Having co-organized three EC-sponsored meetings in France in 2000 and 2001, EPSO failed to see a single reference to plant sciences in the most recent draft of FP 6, despite its inclusion in previous drafts. This seemingly glaring omission, accompanied by the omission of animal and microbial genomics, was likely due to political unwillingness by the EC to support research on GMOs during public health scares. EPSO followed the FP 6 proposal with a response sent to the EC, EP and the Council of Ministers, and plant genomics has duly been raised as an amendment. Comprehensiveness pays dividends.

The European Life Sciences Forum (ELSF) offers a platform to all life scientists to advise the EC in a united fashion. Its manager, Luc van Dyck, however, is sceptical about the EC's desire to include more open-ended academic research in FP 6. Quoting from the FP 6 proposal in 'Research priorities under fundamental knowledge and basic tools for functional genomics', which reads "Research will focus on developing high-throughput tools...", he remarked, "I don't see how they can build networks of excellence around these themes". Van Dyck recognizes the merits of the EC: "they are taking the right line in infrastructures, targeting major diseases and making opportunities for mobility", he said. However, if he has one message it is that scientists must stop expecting the EC to fund long-term basic research: "there should be an independent research agency in the EC, because it's obviously not the goal of the EC to fund basic research", he asserted. Indeed, in Title II of the Maastricht

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Treaty it is clear that the major aim of the EC is to improve competitiveness and employment. It follows from this, that basic researchers would do better to concentrate on their national research councils, and try to dissuade them from taking a lead from the EC in funding distribution.

The elliptical orbit of the EC has taken its science policy from one end of the spectrum to the other. Having concentrated on basic research up until FP 4, it then started a relentless assault on technologies, hence the emphasis on application-driven research in FP 4 and FP 5. The path of the EC does not appear to be converging with planet basic research in FP 6, but we will have to wait for the final version. Conjunctions with politics and public pressure will influence its horoscope in the meantime.

The political tool of influence presently offered by the EC is the 'stakeholder meeting'. The first of the stakeholder meetings, 'Genetics and the Future of Europe', took place in November 2000 in Brussels (Moore and Breithaupt, EMBO reports, 2000). It was planned by some of the most respected names in molecular biology, the Life Sciences High Level Group (HLG) of Commissioner Philippe Busquin. Prompted by the growing public resistance to biotechnology, Busquin assembled the HLG specifically to improve the way in which the EC interacts with its stakeholders.

The EC is quite open about the brief of the HLG. As Kurt Vandenberghe, a Member of the Cabinet of Philippe Busquin, put it, "The high level group was formed because Mr Busquin thought there was too little attention from scientists to dialogue with the public; it is not a scientific committee". Its mandate was to advise him on emerging topics and on how scientists should

communicate with the public. However, he continued, "What they tell the commissioner will trickle down in the FP and will influence policy". The EC under Busquin should certainly be credited with initiatives to involve consumers in the scientific debate. "The Commissioner engages a lot in dialogue; he is personally very committed to talking with stakeholders", noted Vandenberghe. The stakeholder meetings do, indeed, offer scientists the opportunity to communicate the importance of their often esoteric research to the public that ultimately funds it, and that is no small accomplishment.

However, it is clear to its members (all of whom were appointed by invitation) that the HLG is not a means for influencing scientific policy. One of the members, Victor de Lorenzo from the Centro Nacional de Biotecnología in Madrid, discovered the extent of his influence with a paper he submitted to Busquin and his staff, which emphasized the importance of microbial genetics and included many other suggestions to improve FP 6. The initial response was one of great enthusiasm, claiming that it was a "very timely and interesting document ... we'll keep these suggestions in mind". However according to de Lorenzo, "nothing has happened since that I am aware of". He is baffled by a decision-making process that is quite impenetrable to scientists. Hence one would be naïve to think that the HLG was asked for input to FP 6; it was not. In fact, according to Derek Burke from Cambridge, another member, it had no influence on policy at all.

On the other hand, Burke noted that the group had moderate success in changing the traditional style of EC meetings. These had consisted of many people talking, but with little



time for discussion. Finally, a paper would be produced, which rather reflected the prepared talks than the views of the stakeholders. However, Burke is doubtful of the efficacy of a group that has convened in its entirety only once in five meetings. Busquin chose “very busy people who are often too busy to come”, he reflected. He senses, from the diminishing scope for free discussion, that control is slowly seeping back to Brussels.

Moreover, policy advice will, in future, be solicited from the European Research Advisory Board, which was inaugurated in October 2001. Its 45 members, half of which are from industry and only three of which are from the life sciences, will advise the EC on horizontal policy issues such as career structures, mobility and the evaluation of projects, but not science. For that the EC prefers contributions from European agencies and organizations, and the bigger the better. A central umbrella organization, such as the ELSF, “would make our life easier” according to Vandenberghe, who added that “anything that contributes to more European coherence we welcome and encourage”.

The EC may, indeed, listen to large umbrella organizations that represent applied research, but the brutal truth is that basic researchers must mingle with politicians, not shelter under an umbrella. However,

mingling with politicians does not inspire admiration among fellow scientists, as Gottfried Schatz discovered on leaving his research institute at the Biozentrum at the University of Basel, to take up office as President of the Swiss Science and Technology Council. “A colleague remarked ‘Jeff, you have become a politician’, as if I had developed cancer”, he reflected, adding “this is shocking and sad”. Schatz is chipping away at the political monolith by understanding the intricacies of the political connections and contacts both nationally and within the EC. But he takes the daring view that politicians who fight for science should be recognized by scientists. When the American Society of Cell Biology awards prizes for science, it always gives medals to congressmen and politicians for their services to science. In Europe, scientists take it for granted that politicians should support science. But just as science has to fight for half a column in the news, so it will have to fight in the political ring.

Up to the end of the 19th Century, science, business, commerce and trade were as one. Lavoisier, for instance, was a scientist, industrial chemist and economist. He was dispatched with the words “La republique n’a pas besoin de savants”. Nowadays the call might be “Technology doesn’t need scientists”. Turning back the clock to

Lavoisier’s time is a little utopian, if we dispense with the guillotine, so how can scientists be re-established in politics? According to de Lorenzo, there is but one solution: “we have no choice but to organize a professional lobby”. To engage with politics, the academic side of science must change. Schatz is working on a three-pronged attack on Swiss science funding: reforming the creaky academic system, opening dialogue with the public and finally pushing for more investment in research. Politics, according to Schatz, is all about emotions, and this may be hard for scientists to come to terms with: “Scientific logic works in the fore-brain; political logic works in the limbic system—the primitive drives”, he joked; and politics, not science, is the way to the inner ear of the EC.

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Comment (from Mike Withnall, Assistant Director, Policy, Educational and Professional Affairs)

In accordance with Andrew Moore’s advice that size matters when dealing with the EC, the UK Life Sciences Committee (UKLSC) intended to incorporate its recent response to the EC consultation (*Towards a Strategic Vision of Life Sciences and Biotechnology*), into an umbrella paper from the ELSF (that is mentioned in the article) and the Federation of European Biochemical Societies (FEBS). Unfortunately, the EC did not allow a sufficiently long consultation period to permit this, and so the response had to be submitted directly to the EC, and only copied to ELSF and FEBS for information.

The response commented on when it is useful to perform research at a European, rather than a national, level, the need to improve the mobility of scientists within Europe, factors affecting openness in sharing pre-competitive knowledge, and the supply and retention of skilled scientists and engineers (it can be found at www.lifesci.org). The new Chair of UKLSC, Professor Nancy Rothwell, sent copies of the response to the UK Science Minister, the Director General of the Research Councils, and the Government’s Chief Scientific Adviser.