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PRESS RELEASE

Round table discussion *Biomedical Research in Croatia – Present State and Challenges*, co-organized by the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts (CASA) and the University of Zagreb School of Medicine



The round table discussion ***Biomedical Research in Croatia – Present State and Challenges*** co-organized by the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts – Department of Medical Sciences, and the University of Zagreb School of Medicine was held at the grand hall of the CASA Palace on 21 November 2018, between 10.00 and 14.00.

The program started with the introductory addresses of Zvonko Kusić, fellow and president of the CASA, Marko Pećina, fellow of the CASA, and secretary of the Department of Medical Sciences, and Professor Marijan Klarica, MD, PhD, dean of the University of Zagreb School of Medicine, to be followed by the panel discussions on two seminal topics: the synergy of financing research from the European Structural Funds (ESIF) and the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, Horizon 2020 (H2020), and research workload of biomedical faculty.

Introductory presentations at the round table within the topic of the **synergy of financing research from the European Structural Funds (ESIF) and the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, Horizon 2020 (H2020)**, which were held by the renowned professors and experts in this area, were devoted to the analysis of the successful proposals/applications submitted by the Croatian researchers to the Horizon 2020. An analysis of the participation of Croatia in the European structural funds (Operational Programme Competitiveness and Cohesion for Research, Development and Innovations, in the area of Biomedicine and Health) was presented together with the efficacy of Croatia in participating in the

Horizon 2020 programme, particularly in the area of Biomedicine and Health. Namely, Croatia like other „less competitive countries“ of the so-called EU13 does not keep pace with the EU15 countries, and is currently ranked 25th in the whole Horizon programme, and 19th in the thematic area Health, Demographic Change and Wellbeing. It has been shown that the amount of funds financed from the Horizon 2020 directly correlates with the nation's investment in science and research.

All panelists were unified in their belief that extra incentives in evaluating and stimulating leading researchers and their projects are needed. Along with regional consolidation, additional funds should be activated to stimulate the best, since the present results of the Croatian research rely heavily on individual contributions of researchers. The system should facilitate that a wider circle of researchers be introduced into the EU programmes by stimulating the support to researchers, strengthening of infrastructure, financing procurement and maintenance of the equipment, as well as with increasing funds for stronger financing of scientific research.

Addressing the participants on behalf of the Ministry of Science and Education, Marko Košiček, PhD, has announced incentive measures to stimulate the participation in the Horizon 2020 programmes, together with the prospects of financing projects in the area of excellence which have been positively evaluated but have not been selected for financing (Marie Skłodowska Curie and the European Research Council projects).

The conclusion during the presentations and discussion on the second topic **Research Workload of Biomedical Faculty** was that the biomedical faculty are overburdened with teaching, new study programmes are being introduced, and due to employment ban in the public sector new vacancies cannot be filled in with qualified applicants. Having in mind the increased faculty workload in the last five years, only the University of Zagreb School of Medicine has currently had some 100 faculty vacancies. The position of clinical faculty deserves particular attention as a unique problem which was addressed during the discussion, since they can hardly manage to coordinate their dual assignments and responsibilities towards their clinical hospitals, and teaching and research obligations required by their parent medical school as their second employer. According to the recommendations of the Agency for Research and Higher Education based on the analysis of all academic institution in the Republic of Croatia, there is an urgent need for additional employment of faculty as well as better defined distribution of faculty assignments related to their obligations towards research, teaching and clinical practice. Dean of the University of Split School of Medicine, Professor Zoran Đogaš, MD, PhD, has corroborated the statements of dean Klarica and described a unique situation in Split regarding the performance indicators specific to the Split School of Medicine.

Dean of the Zagreb School of Medicine, Professor Marijan Klarica, MD, PhD pleaded for a new paradigm of financing biomedical research having in mind the present research-intensive orientation and academic output of the University of Zagreb School of Medicine which amounts to 25% of the total research productivity in the Republic of Croatia. Nevertheless, its financing is determined solely by the admission quota of the students enrolled. It turns out that through such a financing scheme only teaching activity is financed by the state ministries, whereas research in the last 3 years was financed solely by the Zagreb School of Medicine in the amount of 6 million kuna in order to maintain and support its existing research infrastructure.



The project "Alliance for Life Sciences: Closing Research and Innovation Divide in the European Union" received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 779303.

Dean of the University of Rijeka School of Medicine, Professor Tomislav Rukavina, MD, PhD, also pointed out to the problems of disorganized system and working environment of biomedical faculty characterized by a lack of communication between the Ministry of Science and Education and the Ministry of Health, which are of crucial importance for medical schools in Croatia. Dean Rukavina also warned of a lack of synergy strategy of the scientific development of biomedical research which leads to the fact that the existing problems are solved by „ad hoc“ financing from resources of respective medical schools.

Professor Ksenija Geršak, MD, PhD, vice dean for research of the University of Ljubljana School of Medicine presented the development of research policies of the University of Ljubljana, which established its research strategy as early as 2008 and immediately started with its implementation which gave clear results at the level of Ljubljana's research productivity leaving University of Zagreb behind in its output. The Central University Development Fund was established within the University of Ljubljana with its main goal to finance the research activity of the university.

This round table was held within the European project *Alliance4Life*, funded by the European Union Horizon 2020 program. The project is coordinated by the Central European Institute of Technology (CEITEC) of the Masaryk University in Brno, with partners from nine leading research-oriented universities from less developed European countries. Along with the University of Zagreb School of Medicine the project partners are as follows: St. Annes University Hospital in Brno (International Clinical Research Center – ICRC) (Czech Republic), University of Tartu (Estonia), Latvian Institute of Organic Synthesis (Latvia), Vilnius University (Lithuania), Semmelweis University in Budapest (Hungary), Medical University of Lodz (Poland), Biomedical Research Center SAS in Bratislava (Slovakia), and University of Ljubljana (Slovenia).

Project *Alliance4Life* results from the initiative of ten leading biomedical institutions from EU13 member states. The objective of the project is to overcome the differences and divisions between the EU13 and EU15 countries as regards to research and innovations in the area of Biomedicine. The European Commission has supported this initiative within the Horizon 2020 programme for Health, since it is expected that the results and recommendations of the *Alliance4Life* project can be used as a basis which might contribute in solving the research policy issues in the EU, as well as in other European countries.

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