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PRESS RELEASE

Round Table Discussion for Better Science in Latvia



In June, the Latvian Institute of Organic Synthesis (LIOS), as a member of Alliance4Life, organized a national round table discussion for Latvian policymakers and stakeholders in Jūrmala. The aim of the event was to present the Alliance4Life project outputs and discuss how the findings of the Alliance4Life community could be implemented to improve the Latvian scientific environment.

Representatives of CEITEC Masaryk University (Czech Republic) took part in this event and shared the Alliance4Life recommendations that were used as a starting point for the Czech national round table organized in Prague in May 2019.

The Latvian round table was attended by representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science, the State Education Development Agency, the Ministry of Economics, the Association of the Latvian Chemical and Pharmaceutical Industry, and the Association of Latvian Young Scientists.

“Despite very substantial investments coming from the EU during the past decade, a gap in research performance and innovation potential between the East and West of the EU has not been closed sufficiently. It is also a very relevant question for the national governments and ministries,” Jiří Nantl, Director of CEITEC Masaryk University, introduced the topic in his opening speech. “At this stage of development, it is not purely about more investments, but institutions need to assume responsibility and to be empowered so that the necessary changes for improving the situation are implemented. What we call for is the structuring of national and European debates on research policy so that we clearly distinguish what is the European responsibility (and can be efficiently done at that level), what can be





done at the national level, and what the institutions must do by themselves.” He continued, “Alliance4Life has brought together institutions that are ready to make qualitative changes and have already started doing it.”

LIOS representative and Alliance4Life work package leader, Prof. Maija Dambrova, presented one of the outputs of Alliance4Life – an overview of international benchmarking both amongst Alliance4Life members, and against advanced EU institutions. The main goal of this unique benchmarking study was to identify the best performing institutions within Alliance4Life, and to use their managerial practices as inspiration for the other Alliance4Life members.

“The biggest challenge that we faced was the benchmarking process against the EU advanced research institutions. The challenge stemmed from the poor availability of data caused by the lack of data that are publicly accessible. Substantial differences also exist in data monitoring at each institution. This is due to the traditional practices at each institution, as well as the national evaluation systems and legislation. The Alliance4Life experience clearly shows that we need harmonized performance indicator sets, and it is essential for any inter-institutional benchmarking of health R&I performance in the EU. We, as Alliance4Life, propose to establish and promote presented indicators as a basis for the development of standardized performance monitoring and benchmarking in the EU,” summarized Prof. Maija Dambrova.

“Nevertheless, if we compare Alliance4Life and selected EU advanced institutions in the Excellent Science domain, we see that a gap between them exists, especially for the quality of publications,” she added.

LIOS Director, Osvalds Pugovičs, introduced the best practices of scientific management identified from benchmarking results and Alliance4Life in general. *“The implementation of these good practices does not always require huge financial resources. It is just a matter of thinking, just a matter of attitude,”* pointed out the Director of LIOS.

The best practices cover the following topics by themes of institutional management – science evaluation and benchmarking, research ethics and research integrity in health and life sciences, grant support and dissemination of funding opportunities, progressive career, human resources and mobility policies, defined principles for core facilities, policies for Intellectual Property (IP) protection and IP protection policy, and strategies for effective science communication.

“We are not competing with each other, we are just trying to move forward and transform ourselves into better research institutions. We will use the identified best practices for Alliance4Life recommendations at institutional, national, and EU levels for the future development of strategies to enhance our everyday life,” said Osvalds Pugovičs.

The Coordinator of Alliance4Life, Zlatuše Novotná (CEITEC Masaryk University), briefly reported the key issues discussed during the Czech national round table in May 2019. They are openness, fairness, and motivation. *“If a positive change in science advancement is to be achieved, all three topics must be developed simultaneously. Openness in science can be understood on many levels, most often as “open access,” meaning information, results, and data sharing. Fairness is demonstrated by setting up a predictable and transparent career system, preventing inbreeding, and adopting measures to avoid conflict of interest. Motivation is often focused only on financial motivation, but the key is evaluation as an important part of motivation for producing good scientists and good science,”* Zlatuše Novotná presented.



Potential for Improvement

Core Facilities

Core facilities are one of the most important components of the research ecosystem. They are not only technological, but also methodological platforms that bring people together and strengthen the opportunity for collaboration and better performance. Readiness to share core facilities is a very important incentive. *“I am very glad to see that you showed the need from the research community itself,”* emphasized Līga Lejiņa, the State Secretary of the Ministry of Education and Science.

Alliance4Life advises that core facilities should be supported by national funding schemes to ensure the sustainability of the investments. Core facilities are a part of open science. The openness of science means not only publications in open access journals, but it also includes access to data. Openness also includes the internationalization of science through attracting foreign scientists. Foreign researchers should receive support from receiving institutions.

Līga Lejiņa also stressed that targeting the right partner for international collaboration is of great importance for research institutions. The quality of international collaboration should be emphasized over the quantity, in general.

Collaboration with Industry

A significant topic of the discussion was the collaboration with industry. Following the discussion of the benchmarking results, Gatis Silovs from the Latvian Ministry of Economics brought up that he was surprised that despite the funding amount available in the private sector, industry is not enthusiastic to collaborate with Eastern-European research institutions. Responding to that, Jiří Nantl said, *“Actually, there are not so many universities and research institutions with strong enough reputations to attract private funding. This is partially a task for national governments.”*

Jānis Paiders from the Latvian Ministry of Education and Science was satisfied with the situation in Latvia, and noted that the Latvian local enterprises' investments in research funding of Latvian universities and research institutions is greater than in most European countries.

Prof. Ivars Kalviņš from the Latvian Association of Innovators mentioned an important aspect of collaboration with industry, *“It is a very specific collaboration because industry projects do not target publications.”* Assessing research output, the number of publications should be normalized to the number of FTEs who are actually involved in academic research.

From the perspective of industry, Raina Dūrēja-Dombrovska from the Association of the Latvian Chemical and Pharmaceutical Industry pointed out, *“A match between the needs of industry and capabilities of research is very important and should be taken into account when creating policy documents, such as in the National Development Plan. In Latvia, we currently do not have such a match.”*

Scientific Management

Jānis Ancāns, Head of the Horizon 2020 National Contact Point, suggested considering implementing a national support scheme for hiring professional consultancy services to help institutions to prepare successful Horizon2020 projects. For Alliance4Life, he also suggested to consider joint usage of



professional consultancy services for project applications.

To emphasize the significance of scientific management, Līga Lejiņa said, *“We have to understand that research institutions nowadays have new, additional functions. Recourses for these activities are important. In Latvia, we have debates about the amount and distribution of administrative staff versus the researcher staff.”*

Science Communication

All participants were of the same opinion that science communication is relevant, and that science communication should show the benefits from scientific results to taxpayers and the public in general. *“Science communication might seem like a luxury. In fact, research spends a lot of public money, and scientists should explain to the general public what the research is good for,”* added Jiří Nantl. Līga Lejiņa also highlighted the necessity of science communication, *“I think that at the Ministry, we also try to promote science communication as much as possible.”*

Funding

In Latvia, the state funding for research comes from through institutional funding and grants (competitive funding). Even combining these two, Alliance4Life benchmarking results show that state support is lowest in Latvia (and in particular, at the Latvian Institute of Organic Synthesis). *“Very often, policymakers expect that outstanding institutions will fund themselves. This overlooks the fact that research institutes are part of the public infrastructure that forms the knowledge base,”* highlighted Jiří Nantl.

All participants agreed that an increase in national research funding and predictability are the first two recommendations for the national government. This was also supported by Līga Lejiņa in her statement, *“Securing funding predictability is the utmost goal of the Ministry.”*

Līga Lejiņa continued to follow up on the benchmarking results and suggested for Alliance4Life to consider further analysis of these two types of instruments. *“The differences in the funding structure show that it is time to reconsider the proportions of tailor-made funding schemes versus general instruments.”*

About Alliance4Life

Alliance4Life is a unique alliance that links ten research centres and universities from nine Central and Eastern European countries, which aims at closing the divide in European health research and innovation. Alliance4Life was created at the beginning of 2018, and this new initiative has been supported by the European Commission in the framework of Horizon 2020 Health Working Programme. The Alliance aims to contribute to scientific policy and shape priorities at the national and EU levels, especially with insight on how to increase participation in the Framework Programme and in using synergies between European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), and Framework Programmes (FP) to their full potential.

