Providing an even better service

ESF Office Comment to the Survey of Applicants

Foreword

The European Science Foundation strives to constantly improve the quality of its operations. In these efforts great importance is given to the views and experiences of numerous researchers who respond annually to the Call for proposals to the various ESF Instruments. Their feedback on ESF procedures and the perceived quality of service that ESF offers provides a basis on which to assess whether ESF is meeting its clients expectations, and to help make adjustments if needed.

In the first year of its Strategic Plan 2006-2010, ESF contracted – through a competitive bid – the Gesellschaft für Empirische Studien (GES) to carry out an independent analysis of the views and experiences of applicants in the ESF grant application procedures. The focus of the study was on two funding schemes: the ESF Exploratory Workshop and the ESF Research Networking Programme. It covered the years 2005 and 2006 to avoid surveying again the applicants approached in the last study on the Impact of ESF Instruments and to take into account major changes introduced in the ESF schemes.

The study aimed to measure applicants' satisfaction with ESF operational procedures, to assess the level of the perceived quality of service and to systematically compile the applicants' suggestions on how to improve those procedures.

The report of the survey "ESF Grant Application Procedures in Focus: Views and Experiences of Applicants for ESF Exploratory Workshops and Research Networking Programmes" shows a high level of satisfaction with the quality of Call for proposals texts, the information provided about how to apply, and the application procedures.

The report shows also that the applicants are highly satisfied with the quality of ESF's service and with their interaction with its staff members. Our priority will be to maintain this high level of satisfaction with the quality of operations.

At the same time the report also provides a welcome opportunity for the ESF office to consider how to provide an even better service. The report contains valuable recommendations by respondents on how to improve the quality of ESF operations. Some of the suggested improvements had already been implemented at the time of the survey (notably the improvements in the online application system), others are being implemented now. In the following pages we reflect further on the lessons learnt from the survey and indicate what ESF will undertake in the coming months to further improve the level of its services, taking into consideration among others the views and feedback collected in this survey.

We are very grateful to the applicants who took time out of their busy schedules to take part in the survey and share their views and experiences with ESF. We hope that with the planned actions indicated in the following pages, ESF will provide an even better service for the future.

John Marks, ESF Chief Executive
December 2007

The report of the survey is available under:
www.esf.org/about-us/reviews-evaluation-and-statistics.html

www.esf.org

1. Introduction

The study "ESF Grant Application Procedures in Focus" purposely confined itself to two ESF research funding schemes: ESF Exploratory Workshops and ESF Research Networking Programmes and covered the years 2005 and 2006. Nevertheless the study yielded insights that can be applied to other ESF research funding schemes, as the measures proposed in the following sections will show.

The scope of the survey was limited to the first three steps of the application procedures:
(1) information gathering;
(2) proposal writing and submission; and
(3) selection of the proposals and feedback to applicants (see Chart 1).

Chart 1: Scope of the survey
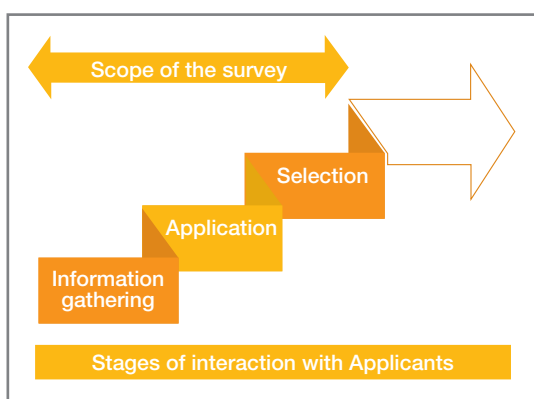
The services provided after the grant decision were not included in the focus study and the comments below remain mainly within scope. They address the publicising of the Call for proposals (Section 2), the information provided in the Call text and the application procedures (Section 3), and the review process (Section 4).

Some of the comments and recommendations of the respondents relate to the general principles of the funding schemes. Currently an ESF internal taskforce is reviewing the ESF Exploratory Workshops and ESF Research Networking Programmes to make suggestions on how to improve the application and management procedures. The feedback of the applicants is also helpful in this exercise. The issues raised in the survey, which will be addressed by the taskforce, are commented on in the last section of this document (Section 5).

2. Information about the Call for proposals

With its funding instruments ESF aims to attract outstanding researchers who will compete on a European level for funding. This goal can be fulfilled only if the Call for proposals reaches the maximum number of researchers across Europe and the specific target group of each instrument. The survey indicates that researchers learn about ESF's Call for proposals mainly through the ESF website and from colleagues. It shows also that applicants with a prior involvement with ESF instruments are most likely to actively look for current funding opportunities on the ESF website while "newcomers" are most likely to be informed about the Call by colleagues. An analysis of applicants' data suggests that a previously observed increase in the number of proposals (for Exploratory Workshops) was due to proposals coming from applicants and workshop participants from previous years. Thus a decline in the number of proposals may be partly because there are fewer newcomers submitting proposals.

In recent years strong efforts have been made to widely disseminate information on ESF's Calls for proposals. A leaflet on Calls for proposals is published annually to give information on all the funding opportunities provided by ESF in the following year. It provides summary information about the schemes, the time the Call will be open, the deadlines and necessary internet links. This Call is published online and in the form of printed leaflets (5,000 copies) that are distributed widely throughout the year. In this context, it should also be noted that the ESF website was redesigned in March 2007 and now offers easy access to information about funding opportunities.

Those efforts will continue but additional measures will be made to spread Call information through existing channels both at the national and European level, especially through ESF Member Organisations. Box 1 lists concrete measures to be undertaken.

A great challenge will be to make sure on the one hand that ESF reaches new applicants and receives excellent proposals but at the same to ensure that any increase in the number of proposals remains manageable – both by the peer review system (at all levels) and by the ESF office – and that the success rate is kept at a reasonable level.

3. Information provided in the Call text

Researchers expect Calls for proposals to be comprehensive and to provide all necessary information about the funding schemes and their objectives, eligibility and assessment criteria and submission procedures. At the same time they expect a concise text which does not take too long to read. For the ESF office, the high level of satisfaction with the information provided in the Call is rewarding. It shows that the right balance between comprehensiveness and conciseness has been found. The data suggests that the improvement in information provided (in the text of Calls for proposals) between 2005 and 2006 was matched by a higher level of satisfaction by the applicants. Yet respondents pointed out some aspects in which they feel that more information is needed and they suggested improvements which the ESF office will follow up.

4. Assessment and selection procedures

The survey confirms the often observed fact that the perception of and satisfaction with the assessment and selection heavily depend on the outcome. Respondents whose proposals are funded are more likely to be satisfied with the selection process while those whose proposals are rejected are more likely to be sceptical of the process (some going so far as to question the peer review system). The results in this survey are particularly striking. While 90% of the respondents who were funded say that they are satisfied with the scientific quality assessment, the proportion among those not funded account only for 39%. The corresponding figures for satisfaction with the "transparency of reasons for recommendations about funding" are 84% and 25% respectively.

For an organisation which is committed to scientific excellence there is no alternative to peer review as the quality-assurance instrument. On the other hand, giving an attentive ear to the customers (some of whom have criticised the selection mechanism) means looking beyond a simple explanation of their apparent dissatisfaction and analysing carefully the comments and views of the respondents to see where an improvement of the system is possible. A challenge hereby is to design a sound peer review mechanism which is at the same time in proportion with the size of the grant requested. Box 3 shows the aspects that we will take a particular look at.

> **BOX 3**
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> **A look at the Assessment and Selection Process**
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> • One set of criticisms focused on the discrepancy between positive ratings of external referees and negative funding decisions in the final assessment by the ESF Standing Committees, an issue the respondents seem to associate with low transparency on how funding decisions are made. While this is inherently related to the scarce funding resources available[1], providing information on the number of proposals received in some areas and the distribution of ratings, may help make the selection process more transparent. The ESF letters to rejected applicants now include more information on the overall number of proposals received and funded, and on the number of proposals funded in the area in which the application fell. The letters will be revised to also include the number of proposals in the area of the application (i.e. success rate by leading unit), to help the applicant understand the competitive context in which his/her application was dealt with.
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> • A recent report of the EUROCORES scheme analysed the review process using data from the ESF operational database. The analysis shows a high response rate by the referees and that the target of a minimum number of referees was reached. The report recommended continuous monitoring to detect unwanted developments such as "referee fatigue" which would negatively impact on the quality of peer review. ESF will continue to monitor its peer review process using, among other things, statistical analysis of the internal database.

5. Other issues related to the funding schemes' overhaul

As stated earlier, an ESF taskforce is currently engaged in a review of the ESF Exploratory Workshops and the ESF Research Networking Programmes. The work of the taskforce involves comparisons with similar and related schemes of partner organisations (such as COST) and discussions with officers involved in running the schemes. The taskforce will use the feedback from the survey of applicants in its work and discuss, among other things, the following issues to which some respondents drew attention.

The *à la carte* funding principle

ESF Research Networking Programmes are funded by Member Organisations following a recommendation by ESF based on the review of the proposals. The funding is done by Member Organisations on a voluntary basis and the criteria they use to decide on the funding are not disclosed to the applicants. Moreover this makes the application process too long. The main question here is how to get the feedback promptly from national organisations on RNPs and if the scheduling of the process can be optimised?

Two-stage application process

A proposition has been made to introduce a two-stage application procedure. This needs to be looked into to assess if this would be an improvement both in terms of being a lower burden for applicants and a more efficient use of resources.

(1) One has to also take into account that the success rate varies across instruments due to their different funding mechanisms. Funding for Exploratory Workshops comes from the ESF's general budget. On the other hand, for Research Networking Programmes (RNPs), funding is made available by Member Organisations on an *à la carte* basis.