Review Panel consensus report

The RNA Quality programme has been widely perceived as a very successful enterprise both by the participants and in the judgement of an international panel of independent assessors. All CRPs demonstrated very high levels of engagement and a genuine exchange of personnel, technology and knowledge. For collaborative efforts such as these to be deemed successful they must demonstrate that the whole, in terms of outcomes, is greater than the sum of the parts and in all three CRPs this seems to be the case and there can be no doubt about the scientific excellence of the majority of the outputs. Success is demonstrated on an initial level by the large number of high quality publications in major international journals that ultimately has to be the main objective measure of success. Many of these publications were achieved by the joint efforts of laboratories within individual CRPs offering clear evidence of synergies that are difficult to achieve without an appropriate research network structure such as EUROCORES. Additionally, other publications resulted from the joint efforts of laboratories from distinct CRPs.

A major strength of the program's activities that has emerged is one of multi-disciplinarity, achieved through the use of a wide range of experimental methodologies and organisms. Such broad approaches cannot be undertaken by individual researchers and require an organized research network strategy.

The key focus on networking activities within the programme offered exciting opportunities for younger scientist to participate in the network through exchange visits. A particular highlight was the meeting in Strasbourg, which was organized by and for young researchers, that as well as providing a great instrument for training was a clear benefit to the whole consortium. In addition a number of international scientific meetings, workshops and summer schools were organized through the RNA Quality programme, perhaps more than can be reasonably expected from a programme of this size. These culminated in spring 2010 with a meeting sponsored jointly with EMBO. Through these efforts the participants have excelled in terms of dissemination and, as judged by external reviewers, the research has acquired visibility throughout the European research community and beyond. These forms of exchange are critical to cementing the success of the funding for future developments but also allowed significant levels of technology transfer that further enhance the future proofing of the funding.

A number of specific scientific highlights are noted below and the review panel acknowledge that a significant number of outputs are still pending, mainly due to the time constraints of the scheme.

1. New, world-leading discoveries related to the structure and function of the exosome.

2. The extension of studies of cryptic and unstable RNAs (PROMPTS) in the nucleus.

3. Connecting RNA interference, RNA degradation and mRNA transport to neuronal cell function.

4. The first identification of phospho-regulation of components of the RISC complex.

A number of issues arose in the review in relation to the structure, process and organization of the programme that the panel felt should be addressed in scoping similar, future programme funding calls.

The panel identified three major difficulties in formation of highly competitive and functional international teams. Firstly the dual evaluation process (ESF versus national agencies), and unpredictable funding outcomes for individual groups created by national agencies. This frequently results in endangering the entire international project because if a national agency decides not to fund a group or certain call, then a valuable team member can be lost to the programme, thus losing added value. Secondly the unequal distribution of funds between laboratories as a result of national agency policy rather than the proposed level of contribution, creates considerable inefficiencies, often preventing timely execution of the research. Finally timing of the initial call and vetting processes is exaggerated by the need to balance individual national agency considerations. In order to avoid these problems the panel recommends that while grant agencies retain a crucial role in the evaluation of the proposals, the efficiency and improved outcomes would result from ESF holding a single, ring fenced budget and the central role in evaluation and disbursement.

More generally a number of further suggestions are listed below:

Recommendations:

1. Continued and increased emphasis on providing access for graduate students and post-docs to advanced technologies.

2. ESF should identify the fields in which Europe is/could be leading the scientific research by joining together excellent scientists.

3. Projects should not scientifically copy the EU and national funding. Should be unique for innovative and "out of the frame" proposals.

4. As the panel acknowledged that larger CRPs were more productive, a minimum size of 4 is recommended that should include at least one PI within the first 5 years of independent research.

5. ESF should be more pro-active in disseminating information pertaining to Calls and the outcomes and these efforts should involve the national funding agencies.