

ESF RESEARCH CONFERENCES

Rapporteur Report

Partnership:	ESF-EMBO
Conference Title:	Epigenetics in context
Dates:	18-23 September 2011
Chair:	Vincent Colot & Oliver Bossdorf
Rapporteur:	Koen Verhoeven

General Comments

Any general comments you might have concerning the conference, your role, the scientific area covered by this conference, etc.

The conference goal was to bring together leading and young scientists in the emerging research field that explores ecological and evolutionary consequences of epigenetic inheritance. Epigenetics research has a strong tradition in molecular genetics and developmental biology. Exploring the ecological and evolutionary consequences of epigenetic inheritance is a recent development. This effort involves also scientist that are entering the field not from a molecular background but from ecology and evolutionary biology. Not many platforms exist yet for bringing these different groups of scientists together, they typically go to different meetings. The ESF-EMBO conference 'Epigenetics in Context' provided such a platform. It brought together molecular biologists, geneticists, ecologists, evolutionary biologists, theoretical and quantitative biologists, with the specific purpose to discuss the current status and the prospects of this emerging, interdisciplinary field.

Quality of Scientific Programme, Presentations and Discussion

Comments on the balance and scope of the scientific programme, the scientific quality of the presentations and discussions.

The conference included sessions on epigenetic mechanisms, environmental effects on epigenetic variation, quantitative epigenetics, transgenerational epigenetic inheritance, theoretical approaches, and evolutionary aspects. Thus, the conference's scope was broad but the programme was well-balanced. Several of the topics are being addressed by molecular and ecological researchers alike, for instance transgenerational and environmental effects which are studied both in model species and in nonmodel ecological species. The different sessions remained well accessible for all participants despite their varied backgrounds. The scientific quality of the presentations was high. Many of the invited speakers, leaders in their respective fields, did a very good job in presenting broad perspective overviews of their research areas and linking these to the common ground for all participants, namely the ecological and evolutionary implications of epigenetics. A useful finalizing talk (by Eva Jablonka) and a concluding plenary discussion summarized the conceptual advances that were made by the research presented at the conference, and outlined research priorities and challenges for the near future.

Informal Networking and Exchange; Atmosphere

Was the schedule and the atmosphere conducive to an easy exchange of information? Was there time and space for an informal discussion? Were younger researchers integrated?

Both the schedule and the atmosphere contributed greatly to an easy exchange of information. In the schedule an early-afternoon break was scheduled every day and 3 evenings had an extended poster session (with open bar outside). This successfully promoted informal exchange between participants. In my opinion everybody was very accessible and there was very good integration between scientists from different sub-disciplines and also between younger and more senior scientists. The small group size (approximately 100 participants), the relaxed atmosphere and setting and the constructive participation of young and senior scientists alike made this meeting a very successful platform for informal exchange and discussion.

Balance of Participants

Was there an appropriate balance between young and senior participants? Was a balance of national groups and researchers from different (sub)fields achieved?

Koen Verhoeven

Yes, this was balanced well. Among close to 100 participants there were 12 professors who are recognized leaders in their respective fields, 30 PhD students, many early-career postdocs and junior group leaders and also more senior researchers. Participants were from 21 countries, representing research areas from developmental biology, molecular biology, ecology, evolutionary biology, genetics, theoretical biology and bioinformatics. From every perspective this was a very well-balanced group.

Outlook and Future Developments

Will new collaborations emerge from this conference? (How) could the conference outcomes be utilized further? Are there suitable (ESF) programmes or instruments to further the work of the conference?

Yes, new collaborations undoubtedly will emerge from this. Since this is such a recent and multidisciplinary research field, quite some participants met for the first time in person here.

Follow-up

What immediate and long term follow-up would benefit collaborations and dialogues that may have begun at the conference?

Creating opportunities for future meetings and research networks. I think that many participants would be happy if this interdisciplinary meeting would not be a one-time event but would be organized periodically. With some participants we are looking into opportunities for establishing a young scientists network to enable occasional meetings for discussing research opportunities and challenges in this interdisciplinary research field.

Organisation and Infrastructure

Were venue, catering and accommodation appropriate for this conference? Were participants satisfied with the on-site administration and support?

Yes, very appropriate. The venue was convenient and pleasant and had a positive influence on the atmosphere of the meeting. I am not aware of any dissatisfaction with the administration or on-site support.

Summary & Overall Assessment

Was the conference successful; were its aims achieved?

Yes, very much so.