

ESF RESEARCH CONFERENCES

Rapporteur Report

Partnership:	ESF-EMBO
Conference Title:	Synthetic Biology of Antibiotic Production
Dates:	2-7 October, 2011
Chair:	Eriko Takano
Rapporteur:	Michael Fischbach

General Comments

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

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 presentations and discussions were of exceptionally high quality. The scientific program was balanced evenly between researchers from two communities: natural product biosynthesis and synthetic biology. This led to a great deal of discussion between members of these communities, and the coffee breaks and meals were abuzz with conversations about planning new collaborations. This is exactly the sort of activity that a conference should promote, so by this metric (and all others I can think of) this conference was a big success.

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?

The schedule and atmosphere were very conducive to a free flowing exchange of information. Lots of unpublished data was presented, and the regularly spaced breaks, meals, and free time gave plenty of opportunities for people to ask questions of each other offline and to plan new collaborations (see previous answer).

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?

There was indeed a nice balance of young and senior participants, tilted slightly toward young participants (students and postdoctoral fellows). One of the nice touches was that many of the younger participants were given short slots for talks, which were met with great enthusiasm by the group. There was a great mixture of researchers from Europe, the USA, and Asia, and it was evenly balanced among chemists, microbiologists, synthetic biologists/genetic engineers, and bioinformaticists. Overall, a very balanced and diverse meeting.

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?

In a word, absolutely. This has been among the most productive conferences I've attended as measured by nascent, budding collaborations. One obvious way to further the work of the conference is to repeat it annually or bi-annually; there would clearly be strong enthusiasm among the participants and many new participants who would like to 'claw' their way in.

Follow-up

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

There was a very informative session at the end of the conference in which participants were asked a series of questions about, e.g., what they learned, how well they thought the conference went, and what they thought the next steps should be (if any). The themes from the participants responses were: 1) that the worlds of natural product research and synthetic biology have been far apart and have not 'spoken each other's language'; 2) that the conference did a great job of introducing the fields to each other and moving them a little closer together; and 3) that the conference should become a regular event and that money should be allocated to projects that would incentivize natural products researchers and synthetic biologists to collaborate.

Organisation and Infrastructure

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

The venue, catering, and accommodation were appropriate for the conference and met with broad approval among the participants. The setting is a lovely town on the Mediterranean coast of Spain, and Hotel Eden Roc provided well appointed guest rooms, a comfortable meeting room, great meals, and proximity to lots of leisure activities that were conducive to making new connections (e.g., just a few steps down for a swim in the Mediterranean).

Summary & Overall Assessment

Was the conference successful; were its aims achieved?

The conference was a major success. Not only did it achieve its aim of introducing key members of the natural product biosynthesis and synthetic biology communities, but it achieved far more than just this goal by stimulating myriad new collaborations. It is rare indeed to see a brand new conference achieve such success in its first iteration, and I strongly recommend that it be repeated annually or bi-annually.

About ESF Research Conferences

The Scheme

This conference is part of the European Science Foundation's (ESF) Research Conferences Scheme. The Scheme aims to promote scientific excellence and frontier level research throughout Europe and the rest of the world. Conferences aim to provide leading scientists and other participants, including young researchers, with a platform to present their work, to discuss the most recent developments in their fields of research and to network.

Conference Format

The core activities should be based on lectures by invited speakers, who are leaders in their respective fields, followed by extensive discussion periods. An informal exchange of ideas, both inside and outside the lecture room, should be encouraged, and the number of sessions in the daily timetable should be limited in order to allow sufficient time for interaction between the participants. Time should be reserved for a 'Forward Look Plenary Discussion' about future developments in the field.

Participants can take all their meals together to encourage further contact and networking, which can be particularly beneficial to younger researchers who may be less outspoken in the formal lecture room setting. In order to gain optimum benefit from the conference, both the speakers and the participants are asked to stay for the whole duration.

Division of Tasks

The Conference Chair is responsible for ensuring the quality of the scientific programme through the selection and invitation of speakers, and through the selection of participants.

The ESF Conferences Unit is responsible for managing all the logistical aspects of the conference organisation, including the provision of an on-site secretariat.

Further information: www.esf.org/conferences