



ERA-Instruments
An ERA-Net initiative for promoting infrastructure
funding in the Life Sciences



Report

on ERA-Instruments' workshop #2 "Stake-holder views"

Santorini, Greece, 13./14.10.2008





Report on ERA-Instruments' workshop #2 on Santorini, Greece, on 13./14.10.2008:

Summary

The meeting had a strong focus on the interaction with and opinions of scientists on the funding of life science research infrastructures (RI). Preliminary results of a poll that has been addressed to European life scientists provided already interesting input. A remarkable outcome (at this stage) is that almost all scientists can find the RI required for their various research enterprises within Europe, although in many cases they do not have all that equipment at hand. The discussion of the poll led to statements and recommendations of the Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) on preconditions and requirements for the successful operation of RI facilities. An additional source of input were the presentations given by the new SAB members as well as the report on the first user-meeting on optical microscopy.

Training and expertise are clearly seen as key issues in the operation of a central facility. Training and teaching are required for on-site staff on various levels from technical to scientific, but also dedicated introductory training courses for visiting scientists need to be offered. The latter do not only enhance understanding of the technique, but can also promote networking among participants, who are typically young scientists. Additionally, the interaction with companies and instrument developers is of importance.

The majority of the SAB and also of the life scientists in general is in favour of a graded user fee model, where users from industry pay full costs while academic groups contribute to running costs with more moderate fees. This is in obvious contrast to the physics community where the free access based on fast-track evaluation (locally by the RI) of applications for measurement time is favoured. Funding schemes must foresee an option for including user fees in project proposals, potentially in the form of vouchers that can be granted. On the European level funding is provided in some cases for transnational access to RI centres. However, access of a scientist to facilities in the same country cannot be funded in those schemes. This gap obviously needs to be filled. User friendly interfaces are considered as a prerequisite for an easy access.

Related is the important and more general aspect of financing the running costs of instruments. The funding of that cost items is often not included in the funding schemes and difficult to obtain. Funding organisations should be aware that a substantial amount of money is needed for maintenance, including service contracts, as well as regular updates and upgrades.

Detailed and specific discussions on user fees and running costs were organized in three subgroups: i) structural biology, ii) proteomics/bioinformatics, and iii) genomics. Result were presented to and discussed by the whole plenum. The outcome will be presented separately.

Opening a facility for external use leads to intellectual property rights (IPR) issues. The workshop participants agreed that rules of good scientific practice have to be followed. A co-authorship for members of the facility staff is only warranted when substantial scientific input of that person contributes to the publication. Just providing the instrumentation is not sufficient for a co-authorship. Nevertheless, use of a facility has to be acknowledged in appropriate ways, e.g. in the Acknowledgement section of a publication. Funding organisations have to find appropriate ways to count these kind of acknowledgements as valid indicators for a vivid and productive use of the instrumentation when evaluating investments or deciding on renewal/extension proposals for running facilities.