



Romanian Mobility Centre Initiative to straighten ERA-MORE

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1. A word from Lidia Galabova EURAXESS Mobility Initiative: the Bulgarian Perspective

The increasing importance of knowledge in contemporary society calls for a shift in the way of thinking of research and development, as well as of the processes related to the creation of new knowledge. Its communication and transfer not only in the corresponding institutions involved, but the knowledge exchange and communication between science and society, and among different countries, as well. This raises a number of issues like the quality and compatibility of scientific and research activity, management and administration of knowledge and research, and last but not least its communication and transfer among different countries.

Young scientists are of particular importance for the future and prosperity of every nation and European Union (EU). Motivating and fostering talented and enthusiastic young people to pursue a scientific career is the basis for developing the intellectual capital of EU. Therefore a number of measures focused on supporting and providing the basic conditions needed for scientists from different countries to perform their research according to best quality standards worldwide have been taken. However there is still a lot to be done in order to overcome the huge gaps in science management administration between the older EU economies and the new member states like Bulgarian and Romania.

It is obvious that the sustainable development and proliferation of every country largely depends on the level of its scientific development and wise implementation of the R&D achievements. Therefore, not only substantial investments in the material and technical foundations supporting the R&D are needed, but a continuous renovation of the scientific personnel as well. In today's dynamically changing environment the combination of knowledge and experience gained by the older generation, and the fresh views of the youths, aware of the latest achievements of science, is needed (Arsenova, 2004).

Though most painful issues related to science and research development in new EU economies are well-know and widely acknowledged, surprisingly there is still lack of strong political will, sound policies, and practical measures to facilitate smooth transition to the knowledge economy. Instead of looking for wise solutions to build on the sound foundations inherited from the past and open-up and network with European and world scientific community, complying with the new requirements of social and economic development quite often inhibiting and myopic practices are seen.

The detailed information; statistical data and analyses and the practical experience gained, during the first (training) stage of the project gave valuable insights on how to improve working

procedures of the Bulgarian Mobility Centres. Training was related mainly to the most common approaches applied to access the Mobility Centre services and the follow-up communication. The shared knowledge of the good practices will help Mobility Centres in New Member States focus their efforts to develop those services that have proven to be of key importance for the incoming researchers. Practical cases presented and interaction with offices during their routine operation helped experience the actual work and actively learn how to cope successfully in different situations.

Key lessons learned from France and Poland will be used as a sound base to develop further the work of Bulgarian Mobility Centres in Sofia, Stara Zagora, Varna and Rouse. First of all, a common database of researchers and research institutions and universities that potentially can benefit from the services of the mobility centres should be established. This will facilitate the process of dissemination of useful, updated information regarding important legal issues, tax requirements, social services, etc. Sending reminders about specific and important for the particular country administrative issues (like deadline for sending a tax report) and information leaflet on regular bases is something needful and practical to most incoming researchers. Furthermore, facilitating socialization and networking among foreign researchers working in the country is not to be undermined as a key factor enabling the transition to working in a multi-cultural environment. Last, but not least the importance of establishing and sustaining a long-lasting cooperation with strategic partners like different Government Institutions, Universities, Research Institutes (Bulgarian Academy of Science), Embassies and Cultural Institutes has to be acknowledged and developed.

During the second research stage of the project, the importance of collecting, systematising and analysing different statistical information has been proved and reinforced. This kind of information helps get a better picture of day-to-day work of the mobility centre; key issues, main activities, problems solved, etc., as well as helps identify the critical areas where special attention is to be paid in order to improve its work.

As a result of the investigation stage and the summing-up sessions during the training of Bulgarian Mobility Centres staff some major problems related to their work were outlined:

- Lack of sustainability as a result of insufficient funding and support from the state.
- Lack of administrative capacity; high turnover of personnel; the work in the mobility centre is not the main occupation, but is in additional task supplementing other administrative functions.
- Limited interest in doing research in Bulgarian from foreign researchers (The most common case of incoming scientists and researchers are visiting lecturers, coming for short stays of about a week, up to 1 to 3 months, mostly as a result of ERASMUS agreements, or different scholarships).
- Lack of developed habits among Bulgarian scientists to rely on, and benefit from the administrative services provided by the Bulgarian Mobility Centres.
- Lack of feedback form different institutions like universities, research institutes, etc. regarding different projects, funding opportunities, vacancies, conferences, workshops, etc.
- Lack of up-to-date infrastructure, facilities and equipment, and bad working conditions in most research institutes and universities.
- Legal problems related to hosting incoming researchers (like Marie Curie grant holders) for longer periods; outdated laws and regulations make it almost impossible to hire incoming foreign researchers in Bulgarian institutions.
- Language barrier of incoming researchers (not enough administrative staff fluent in English; Cyrillic alphabet, lack of experience for working in a multi-cultural environment in many organisations).

In order to improve the work of Bulgarian Mobility centres, first of all, it is needed to provide minimal funding required for performing their day-to-day duties, retaining staff and keeping it motivated, being able to collect and analyse information needed, training and developing staff, and

promoting the services offered to incoming and outgoing researchers.

Special attention is to be paid to the promotion of Bulgarian science, scientific achievement and especially key scientific fields of expertise like mathematics, physics, computer sciences, biology, etc., which might be of research interest to incoming scientists. 'Researchers are not tourists! When they want to move, the most important is to know: What is the level of research? What is good in the country from scientific point of view?' - Veronique Gillet-Didier, CIUP.

2. Discover Europe Training, 9 -10 September 2009, Sofia, Bulgaria

Between the 9th and 10th of September 2009 took place in Sofia, Bulgaria the third work meeting within the Discover Europe Project. The meeting was held by the Technical University of Sofia. This meant it was time for the first "apprentice" of our team to share the knowledge and the lessons learned from the previous two working visits in Paris - France and Warsaw - Poland.

The list of participants included representatives from Ministry of Education, Research and Youth - DG European Affairs and International Relations - Romania, TUBITAK: The Scientific and Technological Research Council - Turkey, the Head of Austrian Science and Research Liaison Office - Sofia and representatives from the Mobility Centres within Bulgaria (Sofia, Varna, Stara Zagora) and the Technical University of Sofia.

During the training TUBITAK – Turkey talked about the EURAXESS network in Turkey, the scientific and technological policies and international research coordination committee that operates within the country.

The rest of the training focused on the Discover Europe Project and the lessons learned in the previous working visits. Therefore, our guests were familiarised with the goals and objectives of the Project, and each of the members. Also, the training provided knowledge regarding the EURAXESS services within the EU. After that it went on, focusing on the two working visits in France and Poland and drew the main conclusions from them.

At the end of the training the main problems that the Bulgarian Mobility centres are facing were underlined and possible solutions were discussed.

The next meeting will take place in Iasi, Romania, where the members will have the chance to meet once again and discuss the new findings and developments within the project and the EURAXESS Network.



3.Features of contemporary Bulgarian Mobility

Rational

One of the key elements needed for high quality research is getting a wide open view of the world as a whole. The experience of another scientific environment, the opportunity to be part of international research teams, learning and understanding different scientific schools is vital for fostering, encouraging and developing creativeness, developing different perspective, unorthodox way of thinking and freedom needed for new knowledge creation. International science mobility has proved as a key factor not only for individual researchers' professional development, but imposed as an optimal way for European Research Area to gain maximal benefit from available scientific potential.

The present report summarises the key results from a recent research of the main characteristics of international mobility conduct by Bulgarian researchers¹. The empirical study was carried out in the period June – December 2009. The target group of the study comprises Bulgarian PhD students and doctorate holders who have been in an academic institution abroad more than one month. The potential respondents were enrolled among scientific conferences participants, among the members of the Union of Scientists in Bulgaria, from annual reports of the institutes of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The individual questionnaire was filled in both during face-to-face conversations or submitted by e-mail. It contents items referred to the personal experience of mobility – frequency, duration, drivers, obstacles, effects.

The collected sample of the survey is explorative and reveals trends in the research problem. It consists of 114 Bulgarian researchers who have returned back to Bulgaria after international mobility. The participants are full-time employed researchers in research institutes (52.6%) and universities (44.7%). The dominating group is of natural and mathematical scientists (56.8%), followed by the group of social sciences and humanities (30.6%). In the survey took part researchers from all age groups. The majority (61.4%) are younger than 35 years, followed by respondents aged between 36 – 45 years (25.4%). The number of female respondents in the sample is predominant (60.5%).

Main results

The analysis of the Bulgarian researchers' mobility shows sound preference for multiple short-term mobility. The majority of respondents (66.7%) resided in a research institution abroad more than once (Figure 1). The total duration of mobile experience for most of the researchers (61.6%) is up to 12 months (Figure 2).



Figure1: Number of the periods spent in an academic institution abroad

Figure2: Total duration of the mobile experience in an academic institution abroad in months

¹ Within this paper the term “researchers” refers to PhD students and professionals with scientific degree (PhD and D.Sc.).

The tendency for short-term mobility is proved as well by a separate investigation of the optimal duration of mobility. 59.6% of the respondents consider mobility between three months and one year as most suitable for them. 25.4% state that even shorter periods (less than three months) are more preferable for them.

The Bulgarian researchers are aware of the international mobility importance in all its aspects. The factors recognized as key drivers for going for research abroad are: “opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills” (98.2%); “enlarging the network of professional contacts” (91.1%); “prestige of the host institution” (90.9%); “experiencing another culture and new social contacts” (86.4 percent); “access to specialized equipment” (84.5%); “publishing possibility in prestigious journals / patent registration” (83.6%).

The mobility is facilitated by “access to information” (92%), “specificity of the research topics” (84.8%) and “previous contact with the host institution” (81.2%). “Previous experience within international projects” (75%) and “prestige of the team leader” (71.4%) also increase the possibility for further international mobility.

Respondents identify some key mobility obstacles for them like: “difficulties in finding a host institution” (27.7%); “family issues” (26.8%); “administrative problems related to the regulation of the sending institution” (25.9%). “Legislation” (25%) and “deadlines for application” (24.1%) are also cited as reasons causing difficulties for successful mobility.

The analysis of the data made shows that working abroad increases the desire of the Bulgarian researchers for “participating as members of international joint-research projects” (77.2 %) and “academic career development” (55.3 %). However, the international mobility enhances as well their pursuing of a long-term scientific career abroad (43.9%).

Conclusion

One of the key findings during the data collection stage was the fact that majority of the Bulgarian researchers have no experience of working in a scientific institution abroad. At the same time, most of those who have managed to experience mobility once are much more mobile in their future work and career. Therefore, programmes and initiatives supporting scientific mobility should pay special attention to solve the problems linked to the initial mobility in the researcher’s career, preferably during PhD studies. They can involve actions related to offering support and advice in the process of finding a host institution, which proves as the biggest barrier for mobility.

Besides the benefits for the individual scientific growth the mobility contributes considerably to the achievement of a critical mass of highly experienced researchers – an important prerequisite for better quality research in general. In order to provide better opportunities for networking and co-operation among researchers additional measures can be developed like organising cross-border workshops and conferences, establishing contacts and long-term collaborations between Bulgarian and foreign institutions.

The collaboration among the European researchers and scientific institutes strengthens the scientific capacity of the integrated European Research Area to deal with the grand challenges of the society.

This short overview was developed by Aneta Sakalova - PhD student at the Institute for Society and Knowledge Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

4. What it is to be an incoming researchers in Bulgaria

One of the main tools enabling the achievement of the new goal of EU towards establishment of common research area is through constant co-operation, interaction, and knowledge-transfer among the EU scientists. There are different measures focused on achievement of this goal, part of them summed in the overarching concept of mobility. However, at present in countries like Bulgaria and Romania it is observed a predominant flow-out of (outgoing) researchers from former Eastern-European countries towards older EU economies, and attendance in broad spectrum of different networking and co-operation events. However positive, the impact of these initiatives on equalising the research area and diminishing the gaps among different EU members states is still moderate. On practice, best scientific capability and potential of Eastern-European countries naturally drains in direction of most highly scientifically developed regions, reinforcing their capacity, but unfortunately increasing even more the gap among different areas. Even, when some of the researcher turn back after their mobility period, it turns quite hard for them to change the status-quo and the established routines.

The general understanding is that as a result of the knowledge-transfer and introduction of some best practices and experience gained abroad by outgoing scientist upon their return, as well as though co-operation and intensive networking among scientists worldwide eventually the gap in the average scientific level among different EU member states will be decreased. However, on practice due to established old mindsets and legacies from the past this turns out to be extremely slow process. So, are there any other options? Can something be done in order to accelerate the transition towards common high-quality and equally scandalised European science. Well, yes. In fact, there is a well thought and established mechanism for attracting incoming researchers to less developed economically counters through FP7: People program. This powerful tool still is not widely acknowledged and practically applied. But, the fact is that attracting incoming leading researchers to work in Bulgaria and Romania will impact strongly new knowledge-transfer, and what is more important will contribute to the slow and painful process of changing some old-fashioned, but established patterns, which inhibit the process of unification of research standards in EU. The point is, that we need to focus more on effective brain circulation among all member states.

However, there are some obstacles. But, who says it would be an easy going process. First and foremost, little is known about Bulgarian science abroad. So, for a researcher from an EU country it would be quite unusual to decide to come do science in a country for which little is known in general, let alone about the scientific achievements of the country. Secondly, it should be bared in mind that there is a strong language barrier. Though in Bulgaria most academics are fluent at least in one of the languages: English, French or German, still the number of Universities and Research institutes where science and research are done in one of the more widely spread European languages is limited. Of course, for the research community this is not the biggest problem, or put it in other words – it something that can be relatively easily solved. But, in Bulgaria administrative services provided in English still remain a problem.

Here comes the role of EURAXESS mobility centres and National Contact Points, who provide all the assistance needed and can aid to a great deal to overcoming the language barer. Over the last years they gained lot of experience and are qualified to provide all services needed.

For further information regarding all administrative issues in Bulgaria check the Bulgarian EURAXESS website <http://euraxess.bg/>

Though at present Bulgaria is not considered to be among the most attractive destinations for mobility researchers from European Union and overseers it should be acknowledged that still there some scientific fields where the level and quality of Bulgarian science corresponds to the top achievements worldwide. Irrespectively of the fact that in most of the Bulgarian Universities and the Research Institutes of the Bulgarian academy of science the infrastructure is rather old there are areas where it is still possible to do science according to the average EU standards, and in single cases even high-tech equipment is available.

One of the most well-developed scientific fields with historic tradition and achievements acknowledged by world scientific community are: Physics, Biology – Biotechnology; Genetics; Ecology, Biodiversity, Bio-Physics , Chemistry, Mathematics, Engineering Studies, Microelectronics, Metal science Technology of Metals , Computer science, Archaeology and History, Agriculture and Food Science and Language Studies and Classical Philology.