Report on the Swiss scientific fact-finding mission to Argentina 2015

Composition of the delegation and its aims

The State Secretary for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI), Mr Mauro Dell’Ambrogio, headed an official Swiss delegation to Argentina from 23 to 28 June 2015. The aim of this mission was to explore the potential for strengthening Swiss bilateral cooperation with Argentina within the field of higher education and research.

The delegation was composed of representatives from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), EPFL, ETHZ, the Paul Scherrer Institute (PSI), Agroscope, the universities of Geneva, Lausanne, St Gallen and Zurich, and the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI). EPFL was represented by Prof. Jean-Claude Bolay, Director of Cooperation and Professor at the ENAC School, and Dr Gabriela Tejada, Programme Leader of EPFL Leading House.

The make-up of the delegation mirrored the growing interest that the Swiss scientific community has in establishing or reinforcing cooperation links with Argentinian institutions and researchers in a wide variety of research areas in which this country is a key player. These areas include: nuclear research and physics, biomedical sciences, biochemistry, medicine, agriculture and agro-industrial research, earth and soil sciences, psychology and social sciences.

Background of bilateral collaboration

It is only recently that Swiss international strategy within the field of education, research and innovation has started to focus on Latin American countries and to see them as promising countries for future partnerships with Switzerland. Until now there had only been limited cooperation with Argentina within the area of science policy. However, in a recent study prepared by EPFL Leading House, the country stood out as part of the SERI mandate to explore potential cooperation with this region. The study pointed to existing research and academic collaboration between Swiss and Argentinean partners, as well the high interest that Swiss researchers have shown in terms of intensifying this collaboration.

Argentina offers a promising science and technology landscape that is based on recent efforts made by the government to promote higher education and research by increasing the research budget and infrastructure and adapting legislation. A consideration of science as a priority field and recognition of international research and academic collaboration as a significant component for the country’s scientific and economic progress are part of the strategy that is being implemented by the current government.

Institutions visited

The fact-finding mission included visits to: the Institute of Biology and Experimental Medicine (IBYME); the Institute of Genetic Engineering and Molecular Biology Research (INGEBI); the National University of La Plata (UNLP); the National University of San Martin (UNSAM); the University of Buenos Aires (UBA); the National University of Cordoba (UNC); the Atomic Center of Bariloche and the Balseiro Institute; INVAP Bariloche; the University of San Andres.

Official meetings were held at the Ministry of Science, Technology and Productive Innovation (MinCyT) and at the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (Conicet). A meeting also took place with the mayor of “9 de Julio” municipality in the province of Buenos Aires.
Results

The Argentinian Minister for Science, Technology and Productive Innovation, Mr Lino Barañao, and Mr Dell’Ambrogio signed a joint declaration, creating the foundation for intensifying cooperation activities between institutions and researchers from both countries. The joint declaration states the desire to extend bilateral cooperation in science between Switzerland and Argentina in the form of joint-research projects, grants and exchanges, and the transfer of knowledge and technological expertise. Furthermore, the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and its Argentinian counterpart, the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET), decided to strengthen their cooperation. The Paul Scherrer Institute (PSI) and the Argentinian Balseiro Institute also laid the grounds for collaboration in the field of research in the material sciences.

In addition to these developments, CODEV and the “9 de Julio” Municipality signed an agreement to promote joint research activities and academic exchanges on urban planning in intermediate cities in emerging and developing countries. From the perspective of the exploratory mandate of EPFL Leading House, the consultations with the diverse stakeholders that formed part of this mission will help to further assess and confirm possible collaboration initiatives with lead universities and research areas for the implementation of new pilot activities.

The fact-finding mission helped to confirm the belief that Argentina offers cutting-edge research in several fields in which Swiss universities and research institutions are also active, and this provides an excellent opportunity to establish new partnerships. Offering grants for joint research projects would certainly respond to the expectations of researchers in terms of materialising in-depth cooperation in fields of mutual interest.