

Exploration activities with Latin America (2013-2016)
Seminar on 2015 Seed Money projects with Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru

“Encouraging Swiss scientific collaboration with Latin America:
How to take Seed Money projects to the next level?”

Thursday 17 November 2016

REPORT

Background

The mandate by the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) given to EPFL as a Leading House for the promotion and coordination of Swiss scientific cooperation with the Latin American region has had various key phases over the last few years. The “Brazilian-Swiss Joint Research Programme” (BSJRP) was established in 2008 and it has operated up to the present day by implementing several joint activities and funding instruments. The Chilean-Swiss Joint Research Programme was implemented during a testing phase from 2009 to 2011 and pilot projects with Colombia and Mexico were funded in 2012.

During the current 2013-2016 phase, EPFL has been leading new exploratory activities with Latin America, aimed at expanding the scope of Swiss scientific cooperation in the form of further strategic partnerships. These activities established Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru as the 5 countries of major interest to the Swiss scientific community.

Seed Money Latin America was introduced in 2015 as a new funding instrument to help increase scientific and academic interactions between Switzerland and these 5 focus countries. It offered grants of up to CHF 25,000 to Swiss researchers and their partners in the 5 focus countries. The call for projects prompted significant interest as a total of 119 proposals were received from 25 Swiss institutions. In all, 28 projects, which dealt with a wide diversity of topics, were selected for a total granted amount of CHF 600,000 (8 with Argentina, 7 with Mexico, 6 with Colombia, 4 with Peru and 3 with Chile). In addition, Top-Up grants of up to CHF 3,000 were granted to 6 projects to help intensify their joint activities and reinforce their collaboration prospects.

Seminar on Seed Money Latin America

The seminar “*Encouraging Swiss scientific collaboration with Latin America: How to take Seed Money projects to the next level?*” was held at the EPFL campus in Lausanne on 17 November 2016. It brought together more than 70 researchers (from Switzerland and Latin America) as well as other stakeholders.

The seminar was opened by Jean-Claude Bolay, the Director of Cooperation at EPFL, and Roger Swifcz from the SERI, who described the exploratory activities carried out by EPFL Leading House, and explained the strengths of Swiss cooperation with Latin America. The research outcomes and collaboration experiences were then presented in depth by several of the granted scholars (from Eawag, EPFL, UNIFR, UNIL, UNINE, UNIZH and SUPSI) and their partners. Stéphanie Boder-Pasche from SNSF and Tristan Piguet from EUresearch gave a talk on funding instruments and they discussed the challenges involved in taking these projects to the next level. The seminar was moderated by Nicolas Mora from the Association of Colombian Researchers in Switzerland (ACIS).

Main points discussed

Mutual interest

The seminar confirmed the mutual interest of Swiss researchers and their Latin American partners in working together and their desire to intensify their cooperation. It also stressed the strategic role that scientific diasporas in the focus countries had played in promoting this cooperation, both individually and through established associations. The participants took advantage of the opportunity to engage in a transparent and critical discussion of the added value of this cooperation, and the limits connected to administrative, contextual and financial issues. Notwithstanding the obstacles they are faced with, the researchers see their collaborations as rewarding and positive learning experiences.

Value of the Seed Money grant and collaboration experiences

The Seed Money grant is an instrument that responds to a genuine mutual interest of Swiss and Latin American researchers. They use the seed funding to carry out preliminary research activities and experimental field work which may open new investigation avenues, or it is used to organise workshops or conferences to advance research questions. Researchers appreciate the opportunity to address issues that they are unable to study in their local settings and they also acknowledge the possibility of accessing unique equipment and infrastructure.

Researchers expressed their satisfaction with their collaboration experiences, and the complementary competences that the different research groups bring to their projects. They emphasised the fact that knowledge transfers work in both directions since both sides benefit in the form of increased expertise and the expansion of their networks. A further added value of the collaborations mentioned by the participants was the possibility of linking scientific research to real societal needs through their projects. Researchers also value the possibility of strengthening academic links and teaching interactions (an example was given of a project that generated advanced discussions for the establishment of a common academic programme with student and scholar exchanges between institutions).

In addition, the Seed Money grant has a scaling-up effect in that it involves the broader scientific community on both sides - Switzerland and the Latin American partner country - thereby impacting a critical mass in the areas of the funded projects. Researchers said that the seed funding had helped to create a platform by bringing together researchers from different disciplines to collaborate. This may increase their chances of mobilizing further funding from local agencies and continuing their collaboration.

For some Swiss institutions, which have already cooperation links with institutions in the focus countries, the leverage provided by the seed funding was greater than it might otherwise have been, as these projects benefit from having a more secure baseline in terms of established collaboration conditions such as prior experience working together, mutual trust, mutual understanding, etc. This enables partners to start working together immediately in a trustful environment, and it also reinforces the partnership prospects.

Use of funding and alternative funding options

In the Seed Money projects, the possibility of using the given budget to cover the research costs of both sides (Switzerland and Latin America) was viewed very positively by researchers, especially for the establishment of new collaborations. Also, the promotion of the involvement of young scholars is something that is highly appreciated. If the use of the budget were more restrictive, only established researchers would be able to participate.

Researchers appreciate the amount of these Seed Money grants as it allows them to start working from the beginning without the need to search for further funds for the 12 months' implementation. However, some researchers mix the various instruments that are available to implement their projects (an example was given of one project that jointly used a Swiss Government Excellence Scholarships and a Seed Money grant to prepare a proposal for the Argentinean-Swiss Joint Research Programme). Wherever it has been necessary, Latin American partners have managed to mobilize funds (mostly from universities and research institutions, and to a lesser extent, from national funding agencies). Their contributions are testimony to their interest and their commitment.

Participants expressed the need for further Seed Money grants as well as other follow-up instruments that support medium-scale projects (those that are beyond the scope of seed funding but which are not yet ready to secure larger grants such as those from R4D, SNSF or the EU). The researchers also mentioned the need to fund exploratory missions in some specific parts of Latin America.

Involvement of national funding agencies

Researchers expressed the need to see how the national funding agencies (CONICET, CONICYT, COLCIENCIAS, CONACYT, and CONCYTEC) can get involved and help maintain the momentum of ongoing collaborations. They said that they face numerous administrative barriers when they try to engage these national agencies in their projects. Some researchers shared their positive experiences in getting funds from them, while others said that getting local funding for the implementation of their projects appears to be time consuming and difficult, and besides the amounts available are quite low. Consequently, the researchers choose to apply for international funding instead, which seems to be easier to obtain.

The participants mentioned specific funding options to continue collaborations, such as those offered by CONCYTEC from Peru (despite the low success rate) or the programme for Mexicans abroad by CONACYT from Mexico. Alternative funding sources mentioned were local universities and research institutions, private foundations as well as industry according to the research impact. Alternatively, the engagement of MAS students, who do not depend on salaries, was an option proposed as a way of upturning human capital in their projects.

Researchers value the investment made by CONICET in supporting full positions for researchers in Argentina. When affiliated researchers participate in international collaborations, this should be considered as an in-kind contribution. In addition, participants suggested that national funding agencies should improve the way they communicate information about calls and funding opportunities to their research communities.

The Swiss Government Excellence Scholarships (ESKAS) and other types of Swiss funding instruments such as those offered by SNSF help to enhance opportunities for bilateral collaboration, and accordingly they should be promoted extensively. Furthermore, strengthening the visibility of Swiss research and academic institutions in Latin America is important because of the high potential interest among students there.

A regional approach but one that takes the contexts of each country into consideration

While there is a need for Seed Money grants and other funding instruments that can support the advancement of this kind of cooperation, engagement and commitment from the partner countries at a top-down level has to be secured in order to effectively advance the process.

Although the regional approach seems to be pertinent, there is no unique "one size fits all" option for the 5 focus countries. The complexity of their socioeconomic realities and the political structures that influence their national science and research systems have to be distinguished and understood. The particular priorities and conditions of each country should be taken into consideration towards more advanced bilateral cooperation with each of them.

While Argentina has recently established a bilateral agreement with Switzerland (the Argentinean-Swiss Joint Research Programme - ASJRP), this is probably not the ideal model for the other countries. The effectiveness of such agreements has to be proven in the praxis with systematic backing, as they should not create higher expectations for researchers than those likely to be satisfied in reality. Finally, it is important to see what other institutional actors, apart from the national funding agencies, need to get involved in the process.

Next steps

The seminar concluded the exploratory activities in the region for the current phase of 2013-2016. The main points discussed will be outlined in the recommendations that EPFL Leading House will deliver to the SERI for the next phase. Information on the follow-up activities will be communicated in due course.

Dr. Gabriela Tejada, EPFL Leading House, CODEV EPFL

Further information available at: <http://cooperation.epfl.ch/LatinAmerica>