

2016 Seminar on Brazilian-Swiss scientific collaboration

EPFL | 26 April 2016

The EPFL Leading House 2016 Seminar was aimed to gather scientists and other stakeholders from Switzerland and Brazil who were involved in the Brazilian-Swiss Joint Research Programme, to take stock of the activities and outcome of research collaborations within the 2013-2016 phase of the bilateral research programme, as well as to share experiences, lessons learnt and to formulate recommendations.

While the introductory words were given by Prof. Jean-Claude Bolay (EPFL) and Roger Swifcz (SERI), panel speakers included Prof. Sergio Gargioni (President of Brazilian National Council of Research Foundations – CONFAP), Gioia Deucher (CEO, swissnex Brazil) and the following researchers: Prof. Frank A. Nüesch, EMPA and EPFL; Dr. Verena Meier Kruker, PH Luzern; Dr. Luca Varani, USI; Dr. Jan Grenz, BFH and Dr. Ata Tuna Ciftlik, Lunaphore Technologies.

The discussions can be summarized along the following key elements:

FUNDING & PARTNERSHIPS

Prof. Gargioni briefly presented the funding system of scientific activities in Brazil, emphasizing on the complementarity of funding agencies between the state and the federal level. Programmes such as TecNova by FINEP are designed for start-up companies; the programme is run by the different states, because the best knowledge of local actors, demand and priorities is found at state (versus federal) level.

Prof. Gargioni also commented that a recently introduced law managing the research and innovation system in Brazil is trying to remove barriers between private and public actors.

Several researchers expressed the difficulties their Brazilian partner researchers faced in securing funding for their joint research projects. In a related note, it was later suggested to approach one of the FAP's¹ (i.e. state level funding agency) in Brazil.

¹ Research Foundations at state level (state of São Paulo, state of Rio, etc.)

According to the analysis carried out by the Leading House on Seed Money grants with Brazil between 2013 and 2015 showed that in fact it is the research institutions themselves (state/federal universities, institutions or research foundations) that provided to be the actual sources of funding as no external funding was secured.

Regarding the Swiss side, it seems to be a challenge for Universities of Applied Sciences to fund the Principal Investigators' salary, as their research activities are not covered automatically; specific funding has to be secured for research-related working time. In fact, salaries of researchers can be included in research proposals, but due to the low amounts available e.g. in the case of Seed Money grants, salaries would use up most of the grant.

Another researcher remarked that the question after completing a successful Seed Money project, is always how to reach larger funding. Some suggestions were shared, including funding opportunities at SNSF within the BSJRP.

It was also mentioned that FAPESP (which is part of CONFAP) has established a formal cooperation and MoU with many Swiss institutions. The Brazilian embassy in Switzerland offered their help to make the required contacts.

COLLABORATION ASPECTS

One Swiss researcher explained that initially he was sceptical about joint research with Brazil, but then quickly changed his mind: the scientific collaboration and work was excellent; some problems (e.g. of administrative nature) arose but they were eventually solved.

It was then advised to be aware that Brazilian publications (in Portuguese) are not always mentioned in international publications platforms or rankings, which use to assess only the scientific production in English, and this can give a distorted impression of the vibrant research activities and scientific performance in Brazil.

One lesson learnt is the risk not to communicate enough with the partners in person; the recommendation is to meet and travel to Brazil more often. Skype doesn't work as well as personal contact; workshops were also important for such exchanges.

The issue of language was raised by several researchers and interestingly they shared quite different perspectives: one mentioned that especially students were not fluent in English, while another researcher expressed that in his experience there hasn't been such problem at all, even with students.

BRAZILIAN-SWISS JOINT RESEARCH PROGRAMME — BSJRP

Relevance and strategic considerations

Researchers expressed that they are pleased about the Brazilian-Swiss research programme and they would like to have more such grants.

One participant mentioned that institutions would welcome a funding instrument focused on applied research and techniques to be developed with Brazil; it was then suggested to explore the possibility of adding funding for applied research as a new instrument in the future.

Asked about the relevance and what could be improved in the BSJRP, researchers underlined that Seed Money grants are quite useful, because they set off research collaboration ideas, allowing something unique, explorative or novel (therefore including an inherent risk) and thereby help to convince people that the idea is meaningful.

Researchers expressed that the BSJRP is an excellent programme, providing a great relationship building opportunity, which is important as one cannot start doing research without first building a collaboration relationship, e.g. by a small project such as the Seed Money projects.

Experiences & lessons learnt

It was strongly emphasised how much complementarity of research topics resulted in a richer collaboration; bilateral research collaborations are much more productive than two teams working separately.

Prof. Gargioni underlined the high interest that the AIT initiative raises; Brazil has a similar cooperation with Berlin, whereby researcher-entrepreneurs get support for their travel and to start the development of a business plan with German counterparts. This emphasises the importance of personal contact as starting point of business development.

Concerning the value of research collaboration with Brazil, G. Deucher underlined that Brazil is an interesting testing ground for innovation, also reminding that there are willing, highly capable and qualified partners across Brazil, which offers niches of excellence, as well as good complementarity of knowledge and know-how.

Exchanges & scholarships

Prof. Gargioni also suggested that it would be highly relevant to start with a small mobility programme; it would be efficient as well, and thus affordable for institutions that have limited resources.

A comment on the BSJR Programme was regarding scholarships as a way to strengthen Brazilian-Swiss research collaborations. In particular to the timing, it was mentioned that funding for two years is too narrow because a PhD usually takes 4 years. It was also noted that the duration of a PhD in Brazil is 2 years.

The Brazilian government funded “Scientists without Borders” programme which provides scholarships for students’ mobility is a useful instrument in this regard, yet no new scholarships are foreseen for 2016 due to drastic budget reduction.

One researcher explained that after conducting his Seed Money project, he realised that his institution had in fact signed a MoU with Brazilian universities and on that base students exchange was taking place; this shows that sometimes such collaboration agreements exist, but researchers maybe not always be aware of them – even internally.

Administrative aspects of the BSJR Programme

Several researchers expressed their high appreciation for the BSJRP instruments, emphasising the way the programme was coordinated - in a quite un-bureaucratic manner that allowed them to focus their time and energy on research and on the scientific exchanges.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is a potential for stronger research collaboration and scientific relationships between Brazil and Switzerland and all stakeholders are invited to continue strengthening it
- Despite the current political and financial situation Brazil is facing at the moment, investment in innovation and the support for future tech-related entrepreneurs remains highly important
- State level funding (vs. federal) should be further explored in Brazil
- Research relations should be supported at institutional level and not only left to researchers to build them
- Further develop fellowship and mobility programmes, which would be fruitful ways of establishing new scientific exchanges, using the existing agreements at institutional level
- The possibility of getting funding for technology transfer projects, which arose as an interesting area for bilateral collaboration should be explored
- Availability of bigger funding instruments complementing the seed money such as grants for joint research projects for 3-4 years should be kept and secure in the long term. This may help increasing the possibilities of reaching an institutional collaboration.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the seminar there was a strong sense of support to strengthen Brazilian-Swiss collaboration, making use of the heterogeneous existing resources including those at state level in Brazil. The satisfaction with the BSJRP is very high and researchers would benefit from more funding support in the future. A large consensus was expressed to increase the exchanges around the Brazilian-Swiss Joint Research Programme and to continuously involve institutions and researchers working with Brazil. The present seminar was highly instrumental in allowing formal and informal exchanges of experiences and establishing contacts for further collaborations.

All participants are warmly thanked for their contribution.

Lausanne, 30 May 2016