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Call for action on the small and medium sized
research infrastructures

September 2018

Building and promoting Excellence in Life Sciences in Europe

Barcelona, 21st September 2018

Call for action on the small- and medium-sized research infrastructures

Last week representatives of numerous research organisations, EU member states, EU institutions as well as international stakeholders from many countries met in Vienna for the International Conference on Research Infrastructures (ICRI 2018). They discussed topics related to the major international research infrastructures and international cooperation in this field. While these discussions were extremely important they overlooked a relevant aspect: the role of small- and medium-sized research infrastructures in the research and innovation ecosystem.

Therefore, we call upon the EU member states, the European Commission and ESFRI to:

- Clearly recognise and acknowledge the important role of small- and medium-sized research infrastructures for European Research and Innovation.
- Map and understand the needs and challenges that small- and medium-sized research infrastructures are facing in Europe.
- Address these needs and challenges while promoting the contribution of these research infrastructures to the sustainability of the research and innovation ecosystem.
- Include specifically the dimension of small- and medium-sized research infrastructures in the framework of the European Research Area (ERA) and the plan for sustainability of European research infrastructures.
- Involve the relevant stakeholders for the small- and medium-sized research infrastructures in the policy process as successfully done in the past at DG Research and Innovation.
- Provide support within Horizon Europe to small- and medium-sized research infrastructures for training, innovation and transnational access, as stipulated by the Competitiveness Council conclusions from May 2018.

Interested parties and stakeholders that endorse the important role of small- and medium-sized research infrastructures are invited to support this statement.

Background

In the autumn of 2017 the European Commission¹ published a call for action on the long term sustainability of research infrastructures based on an ESFRI² report and a public consultation. This resulted in a list of 42 items to be considered when drafting an action plan for long term sustainability of research infrastructures. EU-LIFE has closely watched the process and actively participated in the discussions leading to the launch of these reports.

These reports are very valuable however they only address sustainability of large-sized research infrastructures such as the ESFRI projects and landmarks, overlooking the small- to medium-sized research infrastructures³. We call upon the EU member states, the European Commission and ESFRI to include these essential infrastructures in the sustainability policies and actively support them.

1. The role of small- and mid-sized research infrastructures in Europe and ERA must be fully recognised and acknowledged

Although ESFRI is definitely a success story and an important driver for research infrastructures in Europe, it does not cover the whole ecosystem of research infrastructures. Both on the national and the European level a continuum of research infrastructures exists - from small-sized research infrastructures at research institutes and universities to the European or international research large-sized infrastructures such as CERN (European Organization for Nuclear Research) or ESRF (European Synchrotron Radiation Facility). Whereas the segment of small- and mid-sized research infrastructures provide the most important day-to-day support for the majority of researchers covering all fields of research, and while these infrastructures are at the basis of cutting edge technological development, they are neglected in the report mentioned above and the planning for future sustainability policies of European infrastructures. In addition, even though these small- and medium-sized infrastructures focus currently mainly on internal users, it is important to address their potential role in service providing to external users both locally and (inter)nationally as well as to academia- and industry-based researchers and innovators.

¹ Sustainable European Research Infrastructures – A call for action,
https://ec.europa.eu/research/infrastructures/pdf/ri_policy_swd-infrastructures_2017.pdf

² ESFRI Scripta Vol2: Long-Term Sustainability of Research Infrastructures,
http://www.esfri.eu/sites/default/files/u4/ESFRI_SCRIPTA_SINGLE_PAGE_19102017_0.pdf

³ Obtaining broad consensus among stakeholders on the definition of small- and medium-sized research infrastructures is important. In particular, to clarify their size definition in terms of four main criteria: operational budget, investment budget, staff and external users.

2. Map and address the needs and challenges that small- and medium-sized research infrastructures are facing

Small- and medium-sized research infrastructures fundamentally differ from large research infrastructures. Their needs and challenges should be mapped in order to provide the right support to these infrastructures. For example, challenges related to funding, training, career development or transnational access need to be addressed urgently.

Also, it will be important to identify their contributions to the sustainability of the research infrastructures at the European level. Currently, cutting-edge research is mainly supported by small- and medium-sized research infrastructures, such as for the ERC grantees. For example, from among the EU-LIFE membership, at the research institute VIB, Belgium, 11 small research infrastructures support 29 ERC grantees; at the CRG, Spain, the ratio is 13 ERC grantees supported by 9 small research infrastructures; at the NKI, The Netherlands the ratio is 12 ERC grantees supported by 13 small research infrastructures; and many other examples can be provided across Europe.

3. Relevant stakeholders must be involved

The European Commission presented action points to be mainly implemented by the European Commission itself or by the Member states. Unfortunately, other stakeholders, who can make a difference in formulating and implementing this policy, are hardly involved. These stakeholders include universities and research institutes who often operate research infrastructures. EU-LIFE, an alliance of life sciences research institutes from across the EU and other stakeholder organizations are committed to contribute to the policy making as well as implementation of an EU action plan that shall include small- and medium-sized research infrastructures.

4. Translating policy into action

Agreement on the priorities of the Long-term Sustainability of Research Infrastructures must be translated into relevant (funding) instruments (on the European level mainly through Horizon Europe) with sufficient budget and a simple, transparent application and funding policies coupled to measures such as European networks, conferences and workshops that tackle small and medium scale research infrastructure needs in an integrated approach.



EU-LIFE

EU-LIFE is an alliance of research centres whose mission is to support and strengthen European research excellence (www.eu-life.eu). EU-LIFE members are leading research institutes in their countries and internationally renowned for producing excellent research, widely transferring knowledge and nurturing talent. EU-LIFE partners host 120 small and medium sized research infrastructures with more than 750 staff members that provide a wide spectrum of services to a wide range of internal and external users, both academic and businesses. The range of research infrastructures within these institutes is wide spanning from genomics, proteomics, bioinformatics, NMR, to animal houses, pre-clinical and imaging facilities.

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