

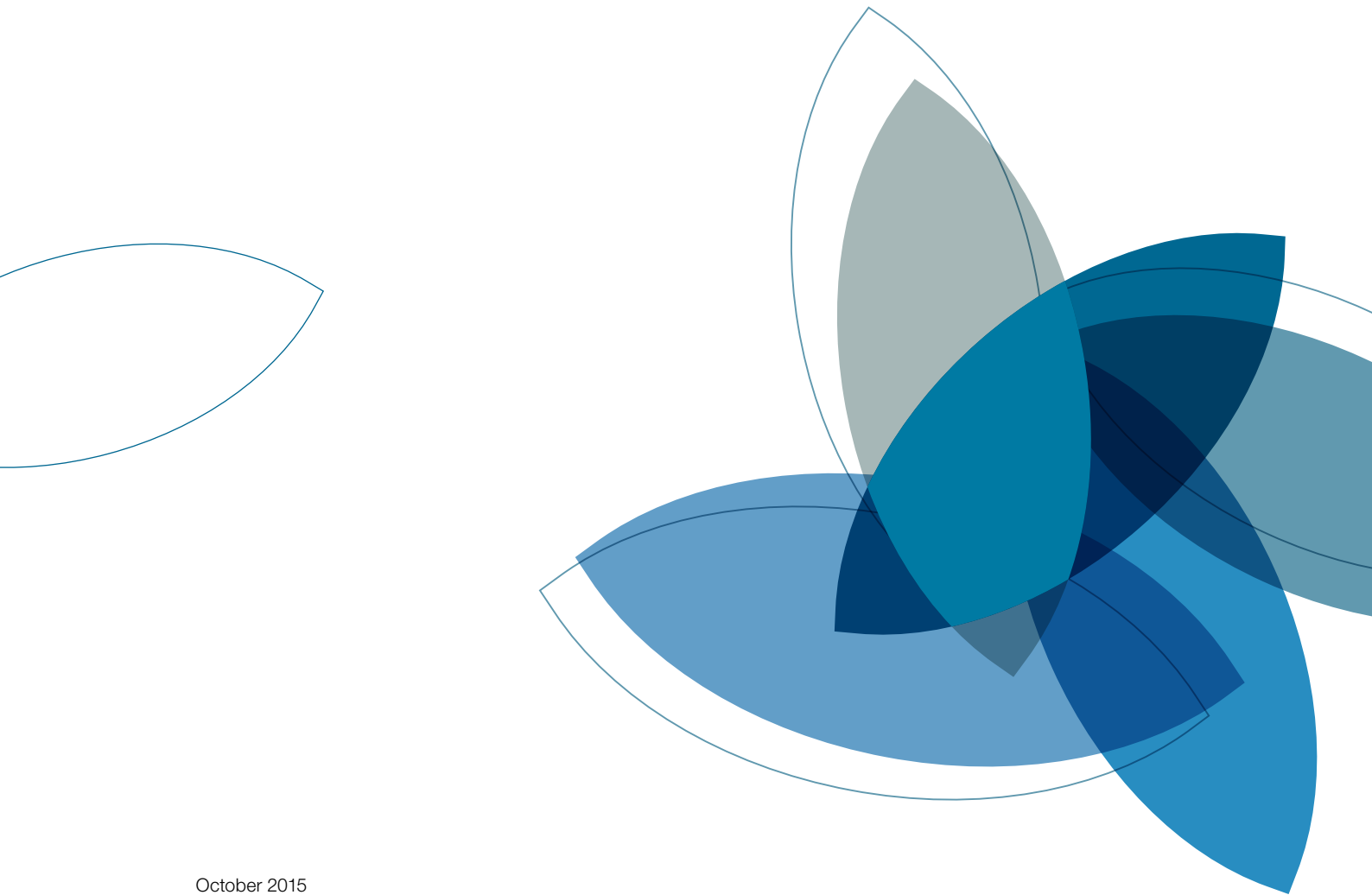
# WORKSHOP REPORT

Lead Agency Procedure Strategies

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**SCIENCE  
EUROPE**  
Shaping the future of research



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'Lead Agency Procedure Strategies Workshop': D/2015/13.324/8

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# Lead Agency Procedure Strategies Workshop

## Science Europe Working Group on Cross-border Collaboration

The Science Europe Working Group on Cross-border Collaboration aims to identify different approaches that facilitate cross-border research, both in terms of research conditions and researchers' needs.



## Background and Objectives

The Lead Agency Procedure (LAP) is a method for cross-border collaboration where a Research Funding Organisation (RFO) is assigned the lead of the peer review process for a bi- or multilateral research proposal by a partner organisation. Basic and technical information on the LAP is provided in the 'Science Europe Practical Guide to Three Approaches to Cross-border Collaboration' (January 2014).<sup>1</sup>

The Guide describes a general framework and principles for the LAP, with some reference to issues of implementation. However, the Guide does not focus on the compatibility of institutional strategies and characteristics of the individual RFOs entering into Lead Agency agreements. As a next step, the Science Europe Working Group on Cross-border Collaboration organised a workshop on LAP strategies to analyse strategic and institutional frameworks in a comprehensive way. The workshop was designed to produce evidence-based recommendations to support the development of successful LAPs, given different national conditions. The aim was to set the LAP and agreements in a wider context, by looking at the broader strategic goals and institutional strategies used by research funders to collaborate across borders. Participants in the workshop analysed the underlying preconditions, parameters and efficiency of the LAP, based on the evidence available from a large number of LAP agreements between Science Europe Member Organisations and other organisations.

This report of the workshop provides policy suggestions on the scope, challenges, limits and conditions for the success of the LAP for members of Science Europe and other partner organisations inside and outside Europe.

# Introduction to LAP

The LAP is one of a number of instruments with the aim of facilitating cross-border research funding. By assigning the lead of an entire peer-review process to one RFO involved in a bi- or multilateral research proposal, the LAP provides a solution to 'double jeopardy' – the risk that for parallel peer-review processes a joint proposal may be approved in one country but not in another. A single peer-review process not only eases the applicants' burden (which is the main goal) but also reduces the administrative burden for RFOs and the overload of scientific experts involved in parallel peer review processes.

## Setting the Scene

Technically, the LAP looks simple given the general definition:

“ The principle on which the LAP is based is the following: RFOs from two or more countries engage in a co-operation in which one of the RFOs involved takes a leading role; this means that it is in charge of carrying out the review process and making a recommendation on whether or not to approve an application. The partner organisation(s) make the formal decision on the basis of the review documentation and the recommendation of the Lead Agency. It is anticipated that the partner organisation follows the recommendation of the Lead Agency. Deviation from this recommendation should be justified. The different project parts are then financed by the respective RFOs so that no money needs to be transferred across borders. The general characteristics of the LAP can be divided into five steps: 1. defining the Lead Agency [...] 2. Joint Application [...] 3. Single Review Process [...] 4. [Individual] Decision Making Process [...] 5. Separate Funding ”<sup>2</sup>

The LAP's principle of simplicity has an undeniably strong appeal. It is often portrayed as the perfect realisation of cross-border co-operation between research funders, with an assumption that Lead Agency agreements automatically produce smooth, joint cross-border funding. Similarly, there is a political perception that the LAP as an instrument will achieve high efficiency and increased co-operation in Europe, and it is frequently held up as an indicator of the progress of the European Research Area.

This apparent simplicity could suggest that one Lead Agency scheme should be applied across the board, which could also serve as an efficient mechanism for peer review of larger-scale multilateral projects. In this context, however, understanding the strategies for the LAP requires an understanding of how it differs from traditional bilateral programmes and other models of bi- and multilateral peer review (as in joint panels), as well as the differences between a system based on continuous application opportunity, as opposed to a call system.

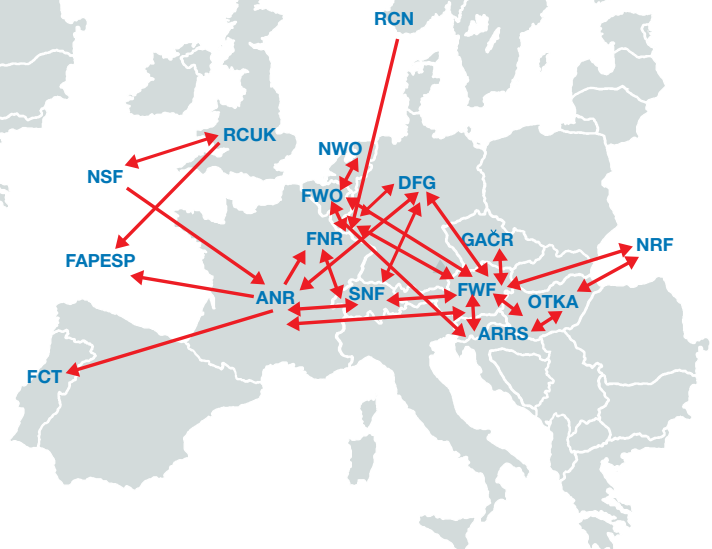
## Evidence

Originally conceived as a pilot model for cross-border co-operation within the 'D-A-CH' group – a partnership between the German Research Foundation (DFG), the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) – the number of Lead Agency agreements between RFOs within and outside of Europe has grown considerably over recent years.

### 2008 Lead Agency Procedure



### Early 2015 Lead Agency Procedure



The arrows in the maps shown above indicate that the LAP's popularity is increasing and is connecting funders worldwide. In fact, in an ideal world of international co-operation, financially secure cross-border collaboration would take place without any constraints relating to partner countries, institutional boundaries, themes or timing. In this ideal world, RFOs could achieve a simple and effective management system using, for example, the LAP.

A closer inspection of the arrows on these maps, however, reveals a more complex picture; not all of the arrows are pointing in both directions, nor are they all connected to each other. This raises two immediate questions:

1. Which factors determine the choice of Lead Agency partners?
2. Which type of Lead Agency agreement is applied?

Existing variants are:

- ▶ bilateral (changing lead, depending on budgetary or scientific focus of the project);
- ▶ unilateral (one RFO always takes the lead); and
- ▶ unilateral – rotating system (e.g. annual change of lead), usually based on calls.

Preferred models of bilateral or multilateral co-operation are usually based on an RFO's international strategy. While some RFOs do not have any specific strategy for defining Lead Agency partners but are open to the model, discussions during the workshop revealed a number of different motivations, mostly for bilateral Lead Agency agreements, such as:

- ▶ neighbouring country;
- ▶ scientifically important country in Europe and worldwide;
- ▶ similarity of partner organisation in size, internal organisation and budget;
- ▶ compatibility of timelines and decision-making procedures;
- ▶ similar peer review standards and criteria; and
- ▶ overall trust (the trust component is an essential condition and trust is built through a number of steps, relying on good mutual knowledge of the partners, and involving all hierarchical levels of partner organisations, from top level management to administrative support staff).

Regarding the different variants of LAP, the choices depend on issues such as:

- ▶ standing open call (continuous application opportunity) versus operation of calls with deadlines; and
- ▶ openness to all themes and subjects versus theme-specific opportunities.

These two sets of criteria show that the interplay of all factors yield quite a complex matrix, with different effects, burdens and overall challenges for the individual partners of a Lead Agency agreement.

## Challenges

The most important challenges are linked to structural issues related to differences in national funding systems, with a considerable impact on the individual RFOs. The major parameters identified by the workshop are:

- ▶ review process and decision-making; and
- ▶ budget, success rates.

The following section outlines a range of factors necessary for a successful Lead Agency Procedure.

### Review Process and Decision-making

In a LAP it is essential to build trust in all partners' review procedures, given that running the review procedure is the responsibility of only one of the partners, as opposed to joint panel evaluation procedures where all partners can participate.

Among the RFOs which participated in the workshop, the reviewer selection process, quality assurance, legal conditions and decision-making structures vary considerably, although the standards of the review criteria show an overall convergence. Similar standards provide a foundation for compatible outcomes even if the implementation of the decision-making procedure is different. Guidance for reviewers and panel members can highlight where standards are similar.

A question was raised regarding the importance of non-scientific criteria, such as impact (social, economic, innovation benefits) and the added value of international co-operation. These criteria are handled in different ways; in some cases, and depending on the circumstance, they are crucial for the selection of recommended projects, while in other cases they are not relevant.

A LAP implies the sharing of the evaluation results, including a provisional decision. The partner organisation then makes a final decision autonomously, based on the review documentation and the recommendation provided by the Lead Agency; the fundamental basis of a LAP is that the partner organisation follows the recommendation of the Lead Agency, apart from in exceptional circumstances. Due to legal constraints, some RFOs, when informing the applicants about the results of the peer-review process, are not allowed to inform their partners about the identity of the reviewers.

Possible solutions to common challenges relating to the review process and decision-making are:

- ▶ **anonymity of reviewers:** partner organisations could choose potential reviewers together; and
- ▶ **transparency:** allowing partners to take part in the review/decision-making panel as observers in order to foster transparency and mutual trust. Ideally, this is done before the Lead Agency agreement is signed as a trust-building measure.

Similar budgetary conditions are needed to enable partners to jointly fund projects which have been evaluated positively by the Lead Agency. An ideal scenario is where the non-Lead Agency has budgetary flexibility, where individual funding decisions are not subject to tight general or disciplinary acceptance rates or budgetary limits. Restrictions can occur where there are major differences in budget size and/or success rates. The budgetary source for funding proposals through the LAP can also cause issues. Funding may come from a dedicated budget for Lead Agency proposals or international projects in general (standard for fixed calls); alternatively, recommended Lead Agency projects may have to compete with all other positively-evaluated projects at a given time (no dedicated budgets) and for a given discipline (standard in a continuous application system). As there is a link between the budget and the success rate, problems might occur if, due to budgetary restraints, the partner organisation funds fewer projects than the leading organisation.

Possible solutions to common challenges relating to budgetary issues are:

- ▶ a common agreement on success rates;
- ▶ a common agreement on budget availability/limits; and
- ▶ a hybrid model, including a joint steering committee that takes a final decision.

In all cases it is important to inform the applicants about the specific framework conditions, in order to manage expectations. More generally, awareness should be raised about the fact that a LAP is not a goal in itself and does not imply higher funding rates for proposals making use of the LAP.

## An Additional Challenge: Language

Requirements relating to the language used for the proposal may differ: some RFOs allow proposals to be submitted in English only; others request additional documentation in the national language of the RFO.

## Contextualisation: a LAP in a Bilateral, Multilateral and European Context

This section covers expectations relating to the LAP as an instrument to support cross-border co-operation. Rather than perceiving the instrument as being of value in itself, focus needs to be on bilateral co-operation in line with the scope and scale of the scientists' expectations. Whether a RFO prefers to focus on bilateral or multilateral co-operation will depend on its international strategy. However, the more partners that are involved, the more likely it is that the LAP will become more challenging to apply in practice and the goal of the instrument – simplicity – will become redundant.

Due to the complexity of factors there is no one-size-fits-all approach either, within or outside Europe. The ideal is to rely on the basic principles of a LAP but to retain sufficient flexibility to allow adaptation to different settings. Rather than harmonisation, the aim would be to find ways to sustainably manage diversity among partner organisations.



# Conclusions

The workshop highlighted the dichotomy between the simplicity of the LAP and the complexity of factors that will contribute to its successful implementation. This report not only highlights potential challenges, but also gives examples of how these challenges can be successfully tackled.

An important asset of the LAP is the fact that it is not a 'new' programme, but mirrors existing programmes of the partner organisations. Harmonisation of approaches and procedures is therefore not considered to be an issue; however, the sustainable management of existing diversity among partners is a key to success. There is no single Lead Agency 'recipe'; rather, there is a range of existing models whose implementation depends on various factors. Although in principle the LAP is relatively simple, it does not arise spontaneously but needs to be agreed upon between partner organisations.

Conflicts which might arise due to different structural features of partner organisations and their funding procedures can only be overcome by good co-operation and continuous exchange among the staff of the partner organisations. If legal requirements between the funding organisations differ (for example, in terms of strictness in the anonymity of reviewers), the partners need to negotiate in order to find a solution which is mutually satisfactory and which takes all mandatory legal requirements into account. Negotiation of a LAP agreement needs to take into account RFOs' specific internal organisation and procedures. This may take time and patience, but the benefits for science make it worth the investment.

It is essential that the programme officers involved understand the partner organisation and find common modes of interaction through mutual learning and respect, and by changing mind-sets. Common meetings, staff exchanges and participation in LAP-related processes can foster good co-operation. An awareness of where each RFO's processes differ is vital, such as in the role and competences of programme officers and whether they are administrative or scientific staff. Mutual trust and communication are the most important factors for a successful LAP. Commitment and trust-building must encompass all hierarchical levels of the partner organisations.

# References

- 1 [http://www.scienceeurope.org/uploads/PublicDocumentsAndSpeeches/SE\\_Crossborder\\_Collab\\_FIN\\_LR.pdf](http://www.scienceeurope.org/uploads/PublicDocumentsAndSpeeches/SE_Crossborder_Collab_FIN_LR.pdf)
- 2 Science Europe Practical Guide to 'Three Approaches to Cross-border Collaboration', 2014, p. 26f.



## 16 December 2014 // Berlin

- 10:30** Welcome, Introduction to the Science Europe Working Group on Cross-border Collaboration and Objectives of the Workshop  
**Dr Priya Bondre-Beil**, German Research Foundation (DFG), and **Mr Sébastien Huber**, Science Europe
- 10:45** Lead Agency Procedure – in a Nutshell  
**Dr Reinhard Belocky**, Austrian Science Fund (FWF)
- 11:00** Cross-border Collaboration Strategies: Objectives for Lead Agency Procedure  
**Moderators: Mr Berry Bonenkamp** and **Dr Reinhard Belocky**
- **Mrs Chloë Somers**, Research Councils UK (RCUK)
  - **Dr Nakita Vodjdani**, National Research Agency (ANR), France
  - **Dr Aniko Csakany**, Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (OTKA)
- 12:00** Collaboration with Europe – the Americas’ perspective on the Lead Agency Procedure  
**Moderators: Dr Nakita Vodjdani** and **Mrs Elisabeth Schenker**
- **Dr Denise Caldwell**, National Science Foundation, USA
  - **Mr Alexandre Roccatto**, São Paulo Research Foundation, Brazil
- 14:00** Strategies for Lead Agency: Goals and Scope  
Discussion in two subgroups on disciplinary areas, peer review, budgets, efficiency and flexibility
- **Group 1:** Chair: **Dr Christoph Bärenreuter**, Rapporteur: **Mr Joël Groeneveld**
  - **Group 2:** Chair: **Dr Carlo Duprel**, Rapporteur: **Dr Gilles Dubochet**
- 14:40** Reports from the Subgroup Discussions
- 15:15** General Discussion on Previous Inputs: Lead Agency Procedure – Success Stories, Pitfalls and Lessons to be Learned  
**Dr Priya Bondre-Beil**, German Research Foundation (DFG) and **Mrs Chloë Somers**, Research Councils UK (RCUK)
- 16:15** Summing Up and Future Steps  
**Dr Reinhard Belocky**, Austrian Science Fund (FWF), and **Mr Sébastien Huber**, Science Europe
- 16:30** **End of the Workshop**

Science Europe is a non-profit organisation based in Brussels representing major Research Funding and Research Performing Organisations across Europe.

More information on its mission and activities is provided at [www.scienceeurope.org](http://www.scienceeurope.org).

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