

Scientific cooperation is of mutual benefit to Eastern Europe and Switzerland

In the first half of 2014, a survey was conducted among the grantees of the SCOPES programme 2009–2012. The responses show that the cooperation is of mutual benefit to all partners in Eastern Europe and Switzerland. Even though substantial results and outcomes have been achieved, many challenges remain for the Eastern European science community.

The recently conducted customer survey confirms that the scientific cooperation programme with Eastern Europe, SCOPES, is a win-win situation for all participants. There are clear benefits for both sides: Eastern Europe receives funds to carry out research of high quality as well as impulses to reform its science system and generate opportunities for the future. Switzerland in turn benefits from the wealth of knowledge that exists in Eastern Europe. Swiss scientists have the option to expand their network of contacts and increase their international presence in an area of Europe where Switzerland has been underrepresented in the past.

Background

The scientific cooperation programme with Eastern Europe (SCOPES) started in 1990 on a small scale. It is organised in four-year phases and jointly funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). Though rather unusual, this cooperation between a research funding organisation and a development agency has proven fruitful in view of pursuing the dual goals of scientific excellence and developmental support.

In the first programme phase, only a few countries were involved. Today, nearly all Eastern European countries and the new independent states of the former Soviet Union are participating in the programme. The main funding schemes are Joint Research Projects (JRPs) and Institutional Partnerships (IPs). JRPs are focused on research itself, IPs on the development and modernisation of institutional aspects of research and higher education in Eastern Europe. Research costs were covered only for the participating Eastern European teams, the Swiss research teams obtained a modest lump sum. No specific themes are prescribed.

Methodology

The aim of the survey was to collect information on outputs and outcomes of the SCOPES programme as this is not included in the final scientific reports of the individual projects. Two separate questionnaires were compiled, one for the Eastern European team leaders, another for the Swiss project coordinators. For the SCOPES programme phase 2009–2012, 59 JRPs and 40 IPs were funded, each with a Swiss main applicant and an average of 2.21 teams in Eastern European countries.

The survey was addressed to slightly more than 300 people in Eastern Europe and Switzerland, of whom roughly two-thirds responded. Two-thirds of the respondents were involved in a JRP, one-third in an IP.

Capacity building

During a JRP with a duration of 24–36 months, an average of nine persons per Eastern European team received financial support or benefited in other ways from the project (in IPs even more). Of the Eastern European researchers who worked on SCOPES projects, 75 % stayed on in academia in their own country after the completion of the SCOPES project. Sixteen per cent changed to another sector in the same country, while 8.4 % left to work abroad.

Main outputs

Most of the JRPs led to publications in peer-reviewed journals (on average four publications per JRP). The respondents reported considerable improvements within the research institutions in terms of research equipment, information and communication technologies and, to a lesser extent, basic infrastructure, services, libraries and teaching equipment. A large proportion of researchers from Eastern Europe say that their handling of new methodologies and approaches in research improved considerably or even to a very great extent. Fifty per cent are of the opinion that higher education and research have strengthened ties between researchers and led to closer cooperation.

All in all, the Eastern European partners had the impression that the project management skills in their departments had clearly improved, especially communication skills, dissemination of research results, project coordination, reporting and building of networks. A large majority said that their research portfolio had become broader.

The researchers from Eastern Europe feel that their participation in the SCOPES project has had a very positive impact on the way their institution/department is perceived in their respective countries as well as in other Eastern European countries. (This view is slightly less pronounced in Western European countries.) They also consider that SCOPES has had a positive impact on their professional network, especially with researchers in their own countries and researchers in Western Europe.

Funding situation

The research funding situation has not improved significantly in the Eastern European countries. Relatively few teams were able to acquire additional funding besides the SCOPES project (only one-third). The main funding sources for researchers in Eastern Europe are, on the one hand, competitive national research funding and, on the other hand, university/academy funding. Funding from international sources lags behind and bilateral programmes, in particular, are considered to bring limited funding only. A quarter of the respondents mention that they were able to acquire funding from European sources.

Difficulties during the project

Besides smaller problems with communication, visa application issues, and others, managing the projects – especially the financial reporting – was quite challenging for the Swiss project coordinators.

Challenges for the future

In the last 25 years, many aspects of the science sector in Eastern Europe have improved, but much still remains to be done. Research funds remain rather low, further reforms of the research system are needed to increase transparency and efficiency, and the general policy framework has to be improved. Salaries in academia cannot compete with industry and there is insufficient support for research careers. In addition, research infrastructures require further investment.

Conclusion

SCOPES appears to provide efficient instruments and mechanisms for encouraging joint research on issues of common interest and for promoting institutional development. Eastern European and Swiss researchers taking part in SCOPES are partially motivated by the additional funding for research and networking, but the main motivation is the scientific competence of their partners. The joint research experience strengthens capacities and networks on both sides. Although the funding level is relatively low per research project (especially on the Swiss side), the grants have proven to be sufficient to initiate and maintain a successful collaboration.