



European Synchrotron User Organization

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LETTER OF CONCERN: TRANSNATIONAL ACCESS

Dear members of the European Commission,

ESUO, the European Synchrotron Users Organization, would like to draw the attention of the scientific community and of the political leaders to the importance of continued funding for Transnational Access (TNA) to European Light Sources (Synchrotrons and Free Electron Lasers). We are deeply concerned about the future of TNA funding, in light of information published by the European Commission (EC) about HORIZON2020 – Research Infrastructures Work Programme 2014-2015.

We urge all responsible parties to guarantee the continuation of an instrument that plays an essential role in European science: in particular, it is of vital importance to scientists and young students from less-favoured European countries, with no national light sources at their disposal.

We are addressing this letter to you on behalf of the more than 25,000 European researchers involved via the TNA scheme in scientific activities in EU light sources. ESUO is indeed the only pan-European organization of this large scientific community. Established in 2010¹, it includes delegates from the national users of all member and associate states. It is the political platform of European users, and its key objective is to facilitate access to European national accelerator-based radiation sources, and to ensure that optimum scientific use is made of these sources.

ESUO, therefore, is extremely worried that the upcoming EU programmes (Horizon 2020) may cease to guarantee transnational access in the spirit of the presently existing schemes which are based solely on the scientific merit of proposals submitted by individual researchers. We are specifically concerned about the uncertain future of the extremely successful concept of an integrated European programme for the transnational use of large facilities.

In the past two decades, and in the spirit of European solidarity, such integrated programmes were very efficient in promoting transnational use for all European scientists; the extremely beneficial impact on the scientific communities of European countries where no large national facilities exist cannot be emphasized enough. In the case of SR sources, the Integrating Initiatives FP6 IA-SFS, FP7 ELISA and CALIPSO made Europe fully competitive in terms of scientific progress, innovation, and technology with its main challengers, the U.S.A. and Japan. It is the transnational access to the network of national facilities which has made Europe very effective, putting European science at an equal level to its major competitors with their centralized and efficient handling of SR facilities and

¹ <http://www.esuo.org>; U. Pietsch & M. J. Cooper, 'European Synchrotron User Organization established', J. Synchrotron Rad. (2010). 17, 428–429

other light sources. Based solely on the scientific excellence of the user proposals that were subjected to a rigorous peer review, transnational open access enabled all European scientists to realize top-level SR experiments independent of their national facilities, including studies directly related to the “Grand Challenges” of modern societies. The TNA users also contributed to the development of the research infrastructure of the facilities, boosting their effectiveness.

What is, however, the future of large facilities and TNA in Europe? There are some positive elements in the plans made publically available, but unfortunately, there are also several signs that give cause for concern. On the positive side, in the programme to be launched in Horizon 2020 calls for development of research infrastructures are again among the top priorities. But still, we are deeply concerned about the survival of the TNA activity²:

- The announced limitations in the maximum budget for a single programme will create an inefficient fragmentation of TNA initiatives - whereas the model of a single coordinated programme has proven its superior effectiveness. This fragmentation has already started through the succession of the earlier Integrating Initiative ELISA with two different programmes, BIOSTRUCT-X (for structural biology), and CALIPSO (for everything else) which will run until 2015. Horizon2020 would be unfortunately characterized by a proliferation of programmes that handle TNA to European light sources, leading to an undue amount of bureaucracy for both facilities and users, and a drastic reduction to the overall scale of access. For example, TNA to synchrotron sources is already decreased in spite of its importance and the actual need of more access to facilities. The fragmentation within Horizon2020 could further jeopardize the essential impact of EU light source to European science.

- Announced programmes like e-Infrastructure are certainly important for SR and free electron laser users in order to handle the enormous amount of data they will generate. However, such actions would be pointless without the TNA programme which brings the users to the facilities where the data are generated. Therefore, such e-Infrastructure programmes should not receive higher priority than coordinated TNA.

- Finally, only a unified management of TNA would allow the exploitation of the full potential of the interactions between users and facilities. We refer in particular to enabling TNA users to select the best facility for their experiments, a need not easily reconciled with the trend towards a single entry point for beamtime applications for all European sources, and to the need to avoid ‘double requests’, for beamtime and for support of TNA.

The bottom line is that TNA to European light sources is indispensable, but cannot be handled by programmes funded with budgets below 10 M€³, or in the framework of bilateral agreements between European countries that have SR sources and those that have not. Such fragmented approaches would limit the freedom of choice for an optimum match between experiment and facility, and lead to an unnecessary bureaucratic burden. And it would unjustly penalize European scientists from less-favoured countries, eliminating the beneficial that TNA has had so far in preventing emigration of scientists and the resulting brain drain.

For all of the above reasons European SR users, through their organization ESUO, urge the EC to adopt a unified programme to handle TNA, profiting from the existing model which is of proven effectiveness, excellence and fairness. We are confident that the voice of a substantial part of the European research community will not be ignored in the vitally important decisions about future strategies.

ESUO would greatly appreciate an opportunity for a detailed face-to-face presentation of our concerns.



² The same reasons for concern apply to the neutron user community, whose running Integrating Activity is FP7 NMI3.

³ Meaning at least 3M€/year.