

**Alignment at Trans-Regional
Level: Case Study No. 6
The DACH Agreement and the
Lead Agency Procedure**



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Case Study No.6 - The DACH Agreement and the Lead Agency Procedure

Dissemination level: Wider public

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ABSTRACT

The DACH Agreement is an instrument of cross-border collaboration, signed in May 2008 between the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) and its partner organisations, the FWF (Austrian Science Fund, Austria) and the SNSF (Swiss National Science Foundation, Switzerland). It relates to the mutual opening of the respective funding programmes with the objective to simplify the execution of cross-border research projects. Simplification is achieved by making one of the funding agencies the only responsible of the evaluation process of the transnational projects ("Lead Agency" process).

In particular, the DACH Agreement – and the related "Lead Agency Procedure" – is a concrete and successful example of cooperation at trans-regional level, which represents a good practice in implementing inter-operability and creates the basis for an alignment at operational level.

In this way, following the Typology Alignment approach, this case study would like to respond to the High Level Group for Joint Programming (GPC) recommendation for actions to enhance alignment for the JPIs, also in terms of inter-operability between national programmes.

The general principle of Lead Agency Procedure is that the RFOs from two or more countries engage in a co-operation in which one of the RFOs involved takes a leading role. In particular, the Lead Agency is in charge of carrying out the review process and making a recommendation on whether or not to approve an application.

This, however, is only possible because the three agencies share the same vision and follow, in their funding procedures, the same guiding principles: (i) fund excellent, (ii) investigator driven research (iii) irrespective of the scientific discipline and topic.

Finally, the adoption of common submission and evaluation procedures using the scheme of LAP can concretely foster and strengthen cooperation among the Joint Programming actors, with particular reference to implementation of joint research calls.

Clearly, the DACH Agreement represents a valuable example of inter-operability and an appropriate framework for identification of good practices and mutual learning exercises amongst RFOs, with a high degree of replicability.

The case study builds on the ERALEARN2020 Task 4.4 ("Alignment at Trans-Regional Level") and relies on an analysis of existing and potential modalities for aligning national/regional activities.

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1. Introduction

This case study investigates a specific modality of cross-border collaboration: the DACH Agreement – and the related “Lead Agency Procedure”.

Even though the lead agency procedure falls outside the spectrum of standard P2P instruments and mechanisms, the DACH Agreement is clearly compliant with recommendation of the High Level Group for Joint Programming (GPC) for actions to enhance alignment for the JPIs: “Member States and Associated Countries are invited ... to improve the inter-operability between their national programmes”¹.

Moreover, the Typology of Alignment (ERA-LEARN 2020 Task 4.1) underlines that “the degree of divergence of national rules and procedures for funding and executing research and innovation (i.e., **inter-operability**) is seen as the main stumbling block at the operational level”.

The aim of this analysis is to highlight and further examine the main features of DACH agreement focusing on the Lead Agency Procedure (LAP) representing a good practice in implementing inter-operability which creates the basis for an alignment at operational level.

From this point of view, following the “*Typology Table of Existing alignment actions and instruments*”², the DACH agreement LAP can fit within the Research Implementation actions n. 15 “**Establishment of a network or alliance of research performing (and funding) organisations**”, including the benefit/strength “*Allows for operational alignment amongst RPOs*”.

Furthermore, the analysis provides evidence of “regional elements” that fostered the start and the success of this example of cooperation, such as geographical proximity, mutual trust reinforced by the common cultural heritage and values, shared issues/problems, etc.

2. Key features of DACH Agreement - Lead Agency Process

2.1 Overview

Within the scope of D-A-CH collaboration, an agreement has been signed in May 2008 between the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) and its partner organisations, the FWF (Austrian Science Fund, Austria) and the SNSF (Swiss National Science Foundation, Switzerland), regarding the mutual opening of the respective funding programmes to simplify the execution of cross-border research projects. Simplification is achieved by making one of the funding agencies the only responsible of the evaluation process of the transnational projects (“Lead Agency” process).

Under this agreement, cross-border applications submitted by researchers from two or all the three countries need only to be evaluated by a single organisation: the Lead Agency. Positive funding decisions from the Lead Agency are accepted by the partner organisations, who then finance the sub-project conducted in their country.

The consideration at the base of the Lead Agency Procedure (LAP) is that the funding of integrated research projects conducted in different countries requires arrangements between funding organisations concerning application, evaluation and funding procedures. Traditionally, project partners have to apply to their respective funding organisation and, provided all the involved organisations approve the proposal, the transnational project can go ahead. This procedure results in, at least, a ‘double jeopardy’ for the applying researcher, as the national peer review procedures are carried out independently³.

The Lead Agency Procedure is an approach that overcomes these difficulties because the review procedure of the whole transnational project is carried out by one of the partner Research Funding Organisations (RFO). The general principle is that the 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 the latter is in charge of carrying out the review process and making a recommendation on whether or not to approve an application. The partner organisations make the formal decision on the basis of the review documentation and the recommendation provided by the Lead Agency. It is anticipated that the partner organisation(s) adopts the recommendation of the Lead Agency. Deviation from this

¹ ERAC-GPC 1305/1/14, REV1 and ERAC-GPC 1310/14.

² ERA-LEARN2020 “Deliverable 4.1- Typology Table of Existing alignment actions and instruments”.

³ Science Europe - Practical Guide To Three Approaches To Cross-border Collaboration.

recommendation is possible but it should be justified. According to the nationality, project proponents are then financed by their respective RFOs so that no money needs to be transferred across borders.

The procedure implies that the role of Lead Agency is in principle up to the agency located in the country in which the requested funding amount is higher. Each Partner organisation, while acting as Lead Agency, will follow its own national rules for reviewing the projects.

2.2 Mission

The Lead Agency Procedure is, basically, an approach for improving the interoperability among different national research systems. In the case of DACH, especially, the main objective is to **simplify procedures for the management of transnational calls and reduce the efforts for the applicants and the Research Funding Organisations**. The rationale behind this is that priority should be given to promote and facilitate international cooperation in basic research activities.

The cooperation agreement between RFOs is at the operational level. It doesn't imply the negotiation of common priorities or shared strategic agenda among the RFOs. While other examples of LAP might focus on transnational research on specific research theme(s), in DACH the only agreed "strategic" element is the bottom-up approach in itself. The core idea is to fund the best research projects, irrespective of their topic.⁴ This however, is only possible, because the three agencies actually share the same vision, and follow in their funding procedures, the same guiding principles: funding of excellent, investigator driven basic research, irrespective of the scientific discipline and topic. Also the selection procedures for projects across the different agencies are very similar: They all rely upon an international peer review principle in their funding decision and they do not fund research, which includes industry or civil society organisations. In addition, all three RFOs also share a high degree of autonomy in the provision of funds.

2.3 Governance structure and activities

The Science Europe report on "Cross-border collaboration"⁵ recognises five major steps of the Lead Agency implementation process:

1. Defining the Lead Agency – The ways of defining which RFO will take the leading role.

In order to establish which of the RFOs involved will act as Lead Agency, different models are available:

- Scientific Focus – the Lead Agency is the RFO whose country is the territory where the scientific focus of the collaborative research project is located.
- Budgetary Focus – the application then has to be submitted to the RFO financing the largest share if the project is successful.
- Person-months – decide the Lead Agency focusing on the person-months which are necessary to carry out the research project in the partner countries.

Partner organisations may also agree that one of them takes the lead for all applications, irrespective of the scientific or budgetary focus, or the distribution of person-months between partners. One reason for choosing this modal may be reducing the administrative burden for one of the partners.

2. Joint Application - What to take into consideration when submitting a joint application.

- The project application in all its parts should be submitted to the Lead Agency in accordance with the specific guidelines in place for the appropriate programme. Then, the non-leading partner RFO receives the complete application directly from the Lead Agency after the reviewing process. It is not necessary to submit the application to the other RFO(s) in addition.

- Alternatively, the partners decide to use their standard application forms. If this is the case, they require applicants to send to the Lead Agency all application forms (including cost sheets) required by the RFOs involved, together with the scientific project description.

⁴ Interview with Dr. Christoph Bärenreuter - FWF Austria.

⁵ Science Europe - Practical Guide To Three Approaches To Cross-border Collaboration.

3. Single Review Process - Issues to be considered when organising the review process.

Partner organisation(s) have the possibility of to suggest qualified reviewers to the Lead Agency. However, the ultimate responsibility for the selection of reviewers, as well as for the management and implementation of the overall review process, should lie with the Lead Agency.

4. Decision Making Process - How the partner RFOs interact when taking the decision.

When the evaluation is completed the Lead Agency informs the partner RFO(s) which, typically, acknowledge the result of the evaluation. If the decision on the funding of the project is positive, each RFO determines the level of support to be awarded to the national partner(s).

5. Separate Funding - How to proceed after the approval of the project.

The Partners organisations remain responsible for financing the part of the project conducted in their respective country, according to their national guidelines.

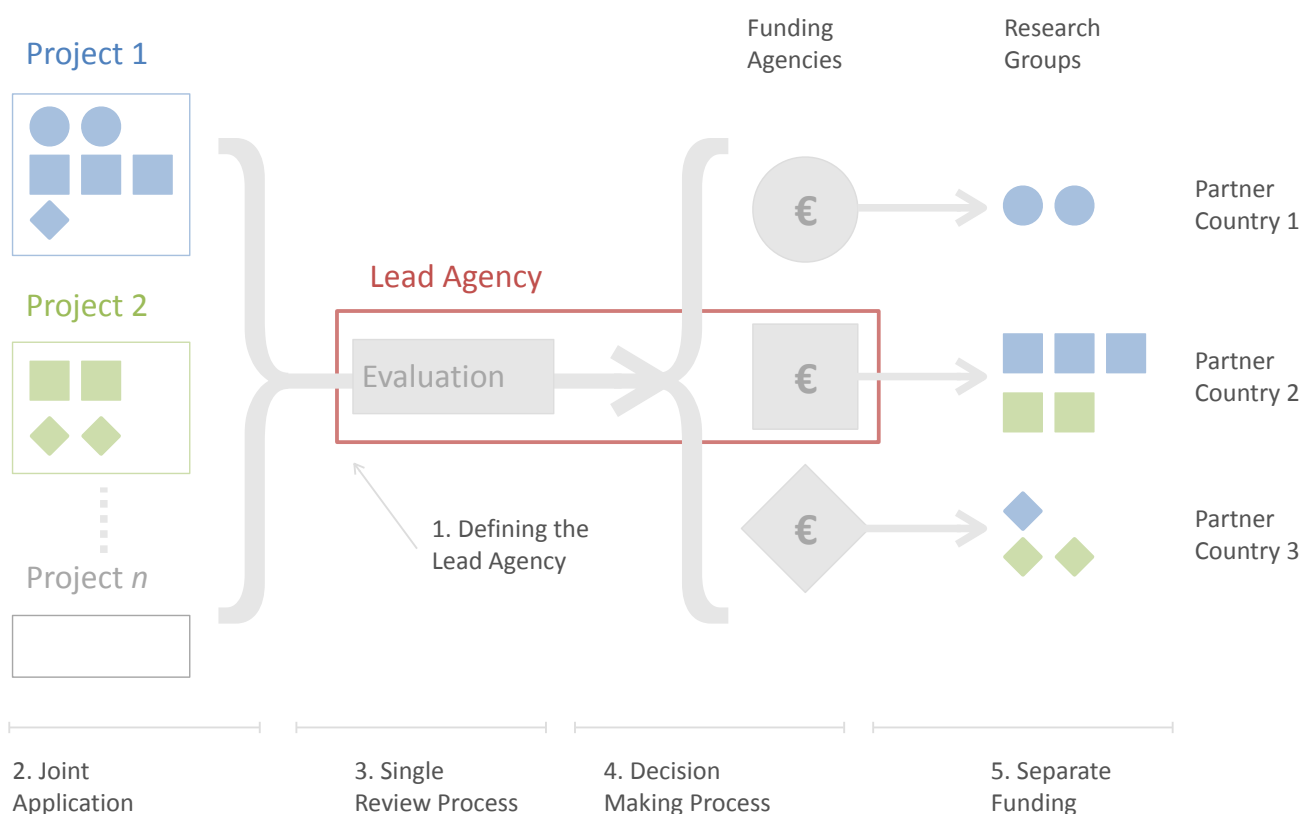


Figure 1: Example of the DACH Lead Agency process.

Existing variants of Lead Agency 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.

At the present, there is not yet a comprehensive analysis of the achievement and results of DACH agreement in terms of official statistical data. However, periodically some RFOs produce internal evaluation reports including data on projects financed and overall impact of the instrument.

3. Overall strengths of this tool, including key principal outputs and achievements

The overarching principles of DACH agreement are the funding of excellent research and the quest for the added value of the international cooperation. Therefore, the key element is the acknowledgement of the value of partnering in supporting transnational scientific research and the common aspiration to provide practical and efficient instrument to achieve it.

Thus, the **bottom-up approach** followed by the DACH organizations in their joint calls is the most suited to effectively implement the above mentioned principles. It represents the main strength of this tool, together with the openness to all disciplines and the principle to fostering the best of research.

In conclusion, the LAP offers the following advantages:

- 1) no need for a double or distributed evaluation: funding decisions are made by the Lead Agency and then accepted by the partner organisations; this also results in less bureaucracy for the project applicant and **reduction of administrative burden and costs**;
- 2) allow greater **continuity through the long lasting cooperation** of Lead Agency agreement, considering that the LAP process foresees the possibility to change role of RFOs, on the base of each specific joint call;
- 3) fund the best research from all disciplines;

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 cooperation in Europe, and it is frequently held up as an indicator of the progress of the European Research Area.⁶

3.1 Review procedure

For the purpose of this analysis, following the structure stated in the "Report on the Definition and Typology of Alignment", the most interesting element is represented by **the Lead Agency Review process**, namely as potential instrument of **alignment at operational level, namely by fostering the inter-operability**.

The LAP instrument foresees the merging of review process under a single RFO, which takes over the entire evaluation process of a joint bilateral or multilateral proposal according to specific criteria (budget, main research focus).

Normally, because national research funding organizations implement the review process according to their own national rules and guidelines, the evaluation procedures may naturally differ in terms, for instance, of the number of reviewers and their selection rules, the measures for preventing conflicts of interest etc. This implies efforts from the both sides of call process, RFO and applicants, in terms of management costs and complexity of the proposals submission.

In the case of the Lead Agency procedure, instead, when a RFO considers to participate in a Lead Agency programme it has to take into account, and should be willing to adopt, the fundamental similarity of the procedures and the quality standards in place or, at least, the intention to "align" this specific part of the whole call management process, namely related to the evaluation procedures. Besides being an example of interoperability, this approach can be also recognised as a factor for facilitating "**alignment**". From applicants' point of view, it means greater uniformity and clarity of rules and procedures.

In this perspective, the most important element of DACH Agreement Lead Agency Procedure is the concrete contribution to the call process in terms of **inter-operability**. The implications on the whole call process management are evident, especially with regard to the possibility of simplifying procedures for applicants and reducing call management costs.

⁶ - "Workshop Report on Lead Agency Procedure Strategies (Berlin, 16 December 2014)" – Science Europe, 2015.

As underlined in the Science Europe Report “*Workshop on Lead Agency procedure Strategy*”, 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.

The efficiency of the mechanism is confirmed by the number of Lead Agency agreements signed between RFOs within and outside of Europe, which has grown considerably over recent years.

However, namely in the case of DACH Agreement it needs agencies which actually operate along the very same line of thinking or with the very same mission. The three agencies also do not have specific « calls ». Project proposals can be submitted at any time in the year, there are no cut-off dates and there is no comparison or ranking between proposals. Actually, every project is evaluated on its own merits.

4. Cross border cooperation and synergies: Regional/transregional factors

The already existing close cooperation between research funding organizations of D, A and CH was certainly a key element, especially in the first stage of development of the DACH Agreement, facilitating the implementation of the Lead Agency Procedure.

Nevertheless, since the LAP implies, and somehow promotes, a sort of **learning by doing cooperation**, already existing regional cooperation may not be required as a precondition for establishing this kind of cross-border collaboration. In this case, we can rather speak of a mutual understanding and trust *in fieri*. The necessary mutual understanding and trust follow and further develop with the co-operation (for example, in the experience of FWF, besides the DACH agreement, it was started also cooperation with Hungary as Lead Agency, where mutual trust increased)⁷.

DACH agreement was signed by Funding Organisations - German Research Foundation (DFG), Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and Austrian Science Fund (FWF) – belonging to the same geographical area and having similarities and strong links, such as very close existing scientific ties between the scientific communities and funding programmes.

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.⁸

Nevertheless, the DACH Agreement is not the sole example of collaboration implementing the Lead Agency Procedure. There are several Lead Agency Agreements involving European Funding Agencies, taken from a 2012, from countries that are not part of the same geographic area and which **do not imply regional elements as key factor**⁹.

In the case of the DACH agreement, we can argue that what we identified as ‘regional factor’ is actually a set of more general elements (something like **pre-conditions**, as described by Science Europe Guide on cross-border cooperation¹⁰) that, at least at the first stage of its implementation, have favoured the success of this tool, such as the *compatibility of funding programmes and instruments* and the *similarities in approval rates and reviewing criteria/processes* as well as the aforementioned *mutual trust and understanding between organisations*.

4.1 Compatibility of funding programmes and instruments

DACH Agreement does not require the support of any specific funding programme. Due to the nature of Organizations involved, neither national priorities nor coordinated or *ad hoc* funding programmes are required or foreseen. Notably, the RFOs which have initiated this kind of cooperation are three independent science councils, not linked with national ministries.

⁷ Interview with Dr. Christoph Bärenreuter - FWF Austria.

⁸ This element was raised during the discussions of the SE Workshop. “Workshop Report on Lead Agency Procedure Strategies (Berlin, 16 December 2014)” – Science Europe, 2015.

⁹ Some examples of existing Lead Agency Agreements involving European funding agencies are indicated in the Science Europe “Practical guide on Cross-border collaboration”.

¹⁰ Science Europe “Practical guide on Cross-border collaboration”, page 34.

Even though the 'national' components of each project are financed independently by correspondent Funding Agency, it's obvious that they are closely interlinked at scientific level. Consequently, it is important to guarantee the coherent development of the different components of the research projects, especially in terms of timing. It means that RFOs engaged in a Lead Agency co-operation need to have in place funding instruments which can be combined with others with the required flexibility.

Concerning the funding scheme, it is a natural consequence of the features of LAP already presented that each Research Funding Agency applies its specific national rules. Basically, the funding mode used is a **pure national funding** and decision on the funding sum in each country is taken autonomously by their respective RFOs. No money needs to be transferred across borders.¹¹ For this reason, in order to prevent situations where the Lead Agency approves an application and one, or more, of the partner RFOs are not able to endorse this decision due to lack of funds, it is crucial to reach a preliminary agreement on the number of collaborative projects that can be funded in the framework of the LAP.¹²

4.2 Similarities in approval rates and reviewing criteria/processes

In DACH, RFOs have to engage in a far-reaching cooperation which can only be successful if with similar approval rates and **similar review criteria/processes** (such as selection of reviewers, the review criteria used to assess the applications, regulations concerning conflicts of interest, confidentiality rules, and so on) or at least a strong mutual trust attitude.

In general, the Cross-border collaboration instruments involve a degree of interoperability and common approaches which are based on mutual trust and understanding between organisations that often operate in very diverse scientific and legal environments¹³.

In this perspective, the LAP requires a **certain degree of flexibility** on the side of the partner organisations to accept review procedures which differ from their own standard procedures.

In this contest, the results of SE workshop underlined that "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."¹⁴

5. Overall limitations with LAP, including difficulties encountered during implementation

While the LAP provides a number of advantages, both for the applicants and for the RFOs involved, there are some **major overall limitations**.

- *Strategic level* - This kind of cooperation started from the pragmatic need of call management improvement, for the benefit of end-users, researcher applicants. This means essentially that a greater attention is given to the practical aspects of the call management, independently from a specific agenda. **No strategic alignment** is foreseen, in terms of a shared research and innovation agenda development, and was not taken into account where this instrument was conceived.

¹¹ Differently from the instrument "*Money Follows Researcher*". See paragraph 7.

¹² <http://www.scienceeurope.org/policy/working-groups/cross-border-collaboration>.

¹³ <http://www.scienceeurope.org/policy/working-groups/cross-border-collaboration>.

¹⁴ - "Workshop Report on Lead Agency Procedure Strategies (Berlin, 16 December 2014)" – Science Europe, 2015.

- *Financial aspects* - At **financial level** there is no any alignment of funding scheme or some kind of merging of funds (e.g. common pot). Also the instrument of Money Follow Research (see next paragraph) is not necessarily about « financing the participation in international projects », as the RFO which initially approved and funded the project, continues to fund the project in the partner country.
- *Timing of call process in the LAP* - In comparison with national projects, the LAP usually takes a bit longer, as the funding recommendation made by the Lead Agency also has to be accepted by the decision making body of the other involved RFO. This may require some exchange and communication between RFOs before LAP cooperation is well established.

6. The instrument “Money follows Researcher”

In the framework of DACH Agreement initiative, another interesting option offered to the research community is the “Money follows researcher” (MFR). It is based on a voluntary effort made by a set of European research organisations to enable portability of the research funding they provide. This instrument, was originally implemented in 2003 by DFG, FWF and SNSF, which signed an agreement, allowing the transfer of national grants between the three countries, representing one of the few example of grant portability¹⁵ (in 2004, also 27 EUROHORCS member organisations in 18 countries signed an MFR letter of Intent¹⁶). Its objective is to avoid disruption of projects and to ensure continuity of funding when researchers move across borders within Europe.

Main features

The MFR is an instrument of cross-border collaboration adopted by the DACH partner countries that allows a project to be transferred to another partner when the Principal Investigator (PI) moves to that country. Money follows researcher means that the funding organization that originally approved and financed the project continues to do so also in the new host country. This measure aims at guaranteeing the continuity of research efforts in times of increased researcher mobility.

Application and administrative procedures do not significantly differ from those which are in place for the allocation of grants. In general, to initiate the process, a request should be made to the organisation which is currently funding the researcher for the use of the remainder of her/his research grant for the continuation of the research abroad. If all conditions are fulfilled, the funding organisation issues a letter declaring that the remainder of the grant is transferred to the new host institution¹⁷ in the country of destination of the researcher.

Typically, the transfer of projects is regulated by agreements based on reciprocity. For instance, the Austrian FWF allows grants to be transferred to RFOs of those countries which, conversely, allow grants to be transferred to Austria¹⁸.

In this regard, following the principle of “money follows researcher”, it is particularly relevant the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding of the umbrella organisation of the European research funding and performing organisations, developed by Science Europe¹⁹.

¹⁵ Report : Analysis of the state of play of the European Research Area in Member States and Associated Countries: focus on priority areas.

¹⁶ For more details, see “*Proposal for procedures for design and management of joint actions*”, extract from the deliverable “Proposal for procedures for design and management of joint actions” of the EU project “CSA Healthy and Productive Seas and Oceans”, 2013.

¹⁷ Science Europe report on crossborder-collaboration.

¹⁸ <https://www.fwf.ac.at/en/research-funding/application/international-programmes/money-follows-researcher>.

¹⁹ Science Europe has developed a Memorandum of Understanding on Money follows Researcher that was signed by funding organisations from six countries.

(cf. <http://www.scienceurope.org/policy/working-groups/cross-border-collaboration/money-follows-researcher/>).

7. Conclusions – Suitability and key factors of success

Considering the main features and achievements of DACH Agreement, with particular focus on LAP, it is possible to make some main conclusions and considerations.

The adoption of common submission and evaluation procedures using the scheme of LAP can concretely foster and strengthen cooperation among the Joint Programming actors, with particular reference to implementation of joint research calls.

From this point of view, the DACH Agreement represents a positive example of inter-operability and an appropriate framework for the identification of good practices and mutual learning exercises amongst RFOs, with a high degree of replicability.

Key factors of success at Operational level:

- **Adopt a bottom-up approach.** The main interest of RFOs involved, both for the LAP and for MFR, has to be to focus on barriers/problems for researcher producing knowledge and try to solve them.
- **Mutual trust and understanding between organisations.** This requires also flexibility, the willingness to embark on a path of increasing trust and availability to cooperate with a “learning by doing” approach.
- **Have analogous “scientific” background and a joint vision of research funding principles.** Having common research priorities, a similar degree of scientific research level is important to create a critical mass to reach best results in research and innovation and meet common challenges; furthermore, and more important, researchers should have the possibility to co-operate with the most suitable partners, irrespective of whether or not they are in the same country
- **Similar administrative procedures.** Although the mutual learning principle enables to benefit from instruments like LAP, have similar success rates and similar reviewing criteria/processes is suitable in order to achieve better results in less time (such as selection of reviewers, the review criteria used to assess the applications, regulations concerning conflicts of interest, confidentiality rules, etc.);
- **Budget.** Similar budgetary conditions are needed to enable partners to jointly fund projects which have been evaluated positively by the Lead Agency. 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.
- **Find suitable funding programmes and instruments** to combine with LAP, in order to deepen cooperation and make collaboration between more strategic.
- **Sign specific agreements,** both for the implementation of Lead Agency Process and the adoption of the Money follows Researcher scheme. It is important to define specific rules amongst Research Funding Organizations. Indeed, to support cross-border collaboration, national research organisations have to develop their own frameworks of collaboration by putting in place procedures and mechanisms that allow them to extend their support to researchers involved in collaborations with partners from other countries.

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Interview

Christoph Bärenreuter - FWF Austria