Spain’s single goal

The Euroscience Open Forum, in Barcelona from 18-22 July, wants to establish itself as a major showcase for science in Europe—as well as a natural meeting place for movers and shakers in science and science policy. *Enric Banda*, former head of the European Science Foundation and the forum’s co-host, tells *Research Europe* that the event provides an important opportunity for Spanish science to put its best foot forward.

As president of Euroscience and co-chair of the Euroscience Open Forum (ESOF), how far have you got in reaching your goal of improving public communication of science in Europe?

Euroscience is very satisfied with the path that such a young conference as ESOF has taken since its inaugural meeting in Stockholm in 2004. In Munich, in 2006, we saw significant improvements in terms of the sessions, attendance and media diffusion. We are aware that communicating science in Europe is a long-term project but are confident that ESOF is heading in the right direction.

How will the Barcelona meeting help you to get closer to that goal? Are you getting the level of involvement that you want from scientists, government, industry and the media?

I am optimistic that ESOF 2008 in Barcelona will represent a step further towards the goal of communicating science in Europe. At this event, we are clearly casting a wider net in an attempt to bring dialogue to all players: scientists, policymakers, business people and journalists. The outstandingly high levels of registration among young people, for instance, augers well for success.

Our programme includes top scientists and policymakers, and part of the function of the meeting is to build up that network, to build up the idea that Europe is there and that we can do things together. I see a very strong future for ESOF; if we are as successful in Barcelona as we were in Stockholm and in Munich, I think that in less than 10 years, it will be the place to go.

What do you think of the level of public understanding of science, generally, in Spain? Will the Barcelona meeting get the attention of the wider public?

I believe the public’s perception of what science is and how it relates to their own lives has increased significantly here in Spain—as it has in many other parts of the world. The mainstreaming of the climate change debate over the past three years is a good example of that. But there is plenty of room for improvement. Some of the issues being discussed at ESOF 2008 in Barcelona, such as energy security and nutrition, impact directly on people’s daily lives. Effectively communicating the science behind those issues is the secret.

Can the meeting match the impact of its US equivalent, the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science? Is the lack of a common first language a problem?

ESOF has turned out to be an excellent platform for science and science policy, as AAAS is, because of the horizontal nature of the meeting. Of course, it was founded with an eye on the AAAS. For the scientific community, you don’t have to worry about language, as English [the conference language] is widely understood. For the policy and business communities, it is not a major problem, but for some journalists (and 450 are registered so far), it may be. The one place where it is really important is in public outreach. In Barcelona, the public outreach sessions will be in Spanish and English and Catalan and whatever helps communication, and we’ll see how it goes!

What do you see as the main obstacles facing Spain as it emerges as a scientific power? Are researchers, universities, government and industry responding adequately to these challenges?

Those of us who live and breathe this sector know how difficult it is to build a strong science base when the starting point is extremely low, as was the case in Spain some three decades ago.

While the situation has improved dramatically, we are still far from the level we should be at. To get there a number of things have to happen. Lobbying by the scientific community for increased public funds that reflect...
best practice needs to continue. However, funding alone will not solve all our problems. It has been clear to us for some time now that the Spanish research system needs significant structural reforms: its university system needs to become more efficient and flexible, and the model for managing institutions that distribute and receive public funding requires major changes. Last but not least, Spain needs to increase the commitment of the private sector.

**Is research and innovation a genuine government priority?**
Yes, the government has doubled the budget for science in just four years—since 2004—which is extraordinary. And total investment in R&D has grown, to 1.2 per cent of GDP. The money part of this is fine—although they need to keep doing it.

**What about university reform?**
The main problem is that the universities are teaching institutions first and foremost—and research establishments second. And universities in Spain have never had enough money. Their structure is, in my opinion, too rigid, with rectors elected by teaching staff, non-teaching staff and students. There is an awareness that this has to change, at some point.

**And what about industrial R&D? Which sectors are strong, and which are weak?**
Spain has undergone a fantastic change in the past 30 years, but the industrial sector is still behind where you would expect it to be. There has been reasonably fast growth in industrial R&D but we are still a long way short of the situation in countries such as the US, Germany and Sweden, where the private sector accounts for about two-thirds of total R&D, and the public sector one-third. We still need to make an effort there. Engineering and the car industry are strong: we are good at medium-tech industry, not so strong in hi-tech.

**Does the European Research Area help, and if so how?**
Spain’s joining the European Community in 1986 was a major turning point for the country. A government commitment to the European ideal helped immensely and I strongly believe that we would not be where we are without Europe. Even though, in those early days, the ERA was not a formalised concept, the effect of networking and collaborating at European level was crucial for us. Today, Spain continues to be an active participant in Europe. It is our natural environment and remains an opportunity for improving the quality of what we do.

The ERA was formalised in 2000 but, in effect, the concept was there before then. We have evolved certainly since then—but it is not happening quickly enough. The responsibility for this lies with the EU member states. They went to Lisbon and said they would achieve this and that by 2010—then they left the Commission to try to get there alone. The 3 per cent target [for R&D as a percentage of European GDP by 2010] is a case in point: to achieve that, you need to invest like mad. Spain has made an effort, but in other places spending has been very stable, and the EU average is flat.

To get real European progress, you need synergy between countries. For example, member states should open up their national programmes to researchers from other countries…but they will not do it. And there have been no real efforts to invest jointly.

**What about the European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructure?**
The ESFRI roadmap is fine, but member states have not committed themselves to act on it. This is what is missing.

**How far are we from a genuinely open job market for researchers from other nations in Spain, and in Europe more generally?**
I believe we are only half way there: the administrative obstacles such as social security portability, lack of coordination between national science sectors and disparate income levels still make job mobility a cumbersome issue.

**Are European institutions such as the European Science Foundation, the European Research Council, Euroscience and the Association of European Universities evolving as quickly as you would like? Are they effective enough to build an ERA that scientists will recognise and feel part of?**
The fact that all of these European institutions are deeply involved in ESOF 2008 in Barcelona is an example of their willingness to contribute to the ERA. However, I still believe the ERA needs to be constructed at a faster pace. The main stumbling block is the nationalism that EU member states take on. Europe cannot continue to discuss endlessly and waste valuable time by repeatedly defining new objectives. It is high time for member states to assume the role the wider research community has been demanding of them—something that will require a serious commitment on their side.

*More to say? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com*

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