

Contacts

Publisher: Ben Crowe
Editor: Paul Smaglik
Marketing Manager: David Bowen

European Head Office, London

The Macmillan Building
4 Crinan Street
London N1 9XW, UK
Tel +44 (0) 20 7843 4961
Fax +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

Senior European Sales Manager:
Nevin Bayoumi (4978)

UK/ RoW/ Ireland:

Matt Powell (4953)
Andy Douglas (4975)
Frank Phelan (4944)
Amelie Pequignot (4974)
Laura Pearson (4977)

Netherlands/ Italy/ Iberia:

Evelina Rubio Hakansson (4973)
Scandinavia: Silje Opstrup (4994)

Production Manager:

Billie Franklin
To send materials use London address above.
Tel +44 (0) 20 7843 4814
Fax +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

International

Advertising Coordinator:

Hind Berrada (4935)

Naturejobs web development:

Tom Hancock

Naturejobs online production:

Ben Lund

European Satellite Offices

France/ Belgium:

Christine Niox-Chateau
Tel + 33 (0) 1 43 20 16 51
Fax + 33 (0) 1 43 20 51 52
e-mail: c.nioxchateau@nature.com

Germany/ Austria/ Switzerland:

Patrick Phelan, Odo Wulffen
Tel + 49 89 54 90 57 11/-2
Fax + 49 89 54 90 57 20
e-mail: p.phelan@nature.com
o.wulffen@nature.com

US Head Office, New York

345 Park Avenue South,
10th Floor, New York, NY 10010-1707
Tel +1 800 989 7718
Fax +1 800 989 7103
e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

US Sales Manager:

Peyton Mason

US Advertising Coordinator:

Ashly de Leon

Japan Head Office, Tokyo

MG Ichigaya Building (5F),
19-1 Harakatomachi,
Shinjuku-ku,
Tokyo 162-0841
Tel +81 3 3267 8751
Fax +81 3 3267 8746
e-mail: k.johnson@nature.jp

Asia-Pacific Advertising Manager:

Kevyn Johnson

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Working with the Framework

Can social engineering work in science? The European Commission (EC) last month took steps to answer this question as it advanced its sixth Framework — a four-year, 17.5-billion-euro (US\$17.6-billion) plan to distribute funds based in part on researchers' abilities to form pan-European research networks.

The initial signs appear positive. In March, the EC put out a call for research ideas in several broad categories. Those ideas are to be evaluated both on their scientific merit as well as on the number of institutions listed. Last month the EC reported that it had received 15,000 proposals. But some scientists who have submitted proposals say that number may be a bit misleading, as some proposals list 50–60 collaborators and some groups appear on several separate proposals.

These numbers can be interpreted in two ways. Looking at the sheer volume of responses, one could say that the EC accomplished its goal of getting scientists to find out who is doing similar or complementary work in other parts of Europe. But examining the redundancy, one could also say that the plan has led to a duplication in proposals, as scientists strive to increase their odds of being a part of a group that makes its way through the funding process.

As a survey of interest in pan-European research projects, the Framework is a qualified success. But as a mechanism to make researchers who have never worked together cooperate, the result is likely to be less positive. Even if a fraction of the respondents submit formal proposals by the end of the year, it is likely that only a few of those will be funded. And of those, it is unclear how they will be managed and evaluated. Coaxing groups to work together seems to be an admirable goal — but making it happen effectively remains difficult to accomplish.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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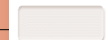
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