

# nature cell biology

## ELSO – not just another meeting

The European Life  
Scientist Organization  
reveals its grand  
designs for biological  
research in Europe

At the beginning of September, the European Life Scientist Organization (ELSO; <http://www.else.org/>) held its first, and in the eyes of most participants very successful, meeting in Geneva, Switzerland. What is ELSO? It was founded about a year ago under the presidency of Kai Simons, a cell biologist at the EMBL in Heidelberg. As a society of individual members across Europe united by interest, its purpose is to promote and give voice to “the science and activities of biologists using molecular tools”. With such a broad scope, ELSO acknowledges the increasing transparency of the barriers between disciplines within cell biology and beyond.

A cornerstone of ELSO's activities is its conference, which aims to assemble scientists working on all aspects of modern molecular cell biology in an environment that will facilitate the exchange of information. In addition, the organization seeks to give scientists (particularly young ones) with limited travel budgets the opportunity to attend a large and important international meeting. Closely modelled on the highly successful annual meeting of the American Society for Cell Biology (ASCB) — for many a must in the conference calendar — this first ELSO meeting attracted around 1,000 scientists. Although this number did not quite match the expectations of the organizers, the interdisciplinary, high-quality programme, together with excellent poster sessions, proved a very promising start. Although it was, at its core, a European meeting, the conference included many presentations from outside Europe — an encouraging trend. The next meeting will be held in 2002 in Nice, France, and from then on it will be an annual event. It is hoped that the 2003 meeting in Dresden, Germany will be able to raise travel grants to allow the participation of more scientists from Eastern European countries, who are particularly restricted financially.

But ELSO has higher ambitions than just the organization of an annual meeting. Many European scientists are deeply unhappy and concerned by the mechanisms behind many European funding systems, such as the framework programme of the European Community. With much dedication to the cause, Kai Simons called for an initiative to lobby Brussels and elsewhere, in the hope that the way science in Europe is funded can be changed — “If you don't do anything, nothing will happen”. To carry this initiative forward, ELSO has set up the Committee on Career Development, which “strives to ensure that opportunities for personal progress through all stages of a scientific career are available to all scientists based on scientific excellence”. The committee held its first meeting in a crowded room at the Geneva meeting, where an animated discussion addressed many related issues including gender and nationality discrimination. A more long-term goal is to nurture the communication between scientists and the public to promote the public understanding of modern life sciences. But the key conclusion from this gathering is that there is an urgent need to initiate and support a pan-European fellowship scheme to fund start-up positions for young scientists. Although there are European programmes in place that fund mobility fellowships at the level of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows, there are none for young researchers who aim to establish their own laboratory either in their home country or elsewhere, a shortfall that contributes significantly to the brain-drain of European scientists. To make such a programme work, it would need to be respected and awarded on the quality of science alone. Although this proposal has a long way to go before the financial mechanism is in place, this fledgling project reflects the essence of what the ELSO has set out to achieve and is therefore certain to gain the support of the European research community. Only the future will tell whether ELSO will achieve its ambitious goals, and *Nature Cell Biology* wishes it every success in these endeavours. □