

Research and Communication in a Scientific Network of Excellence

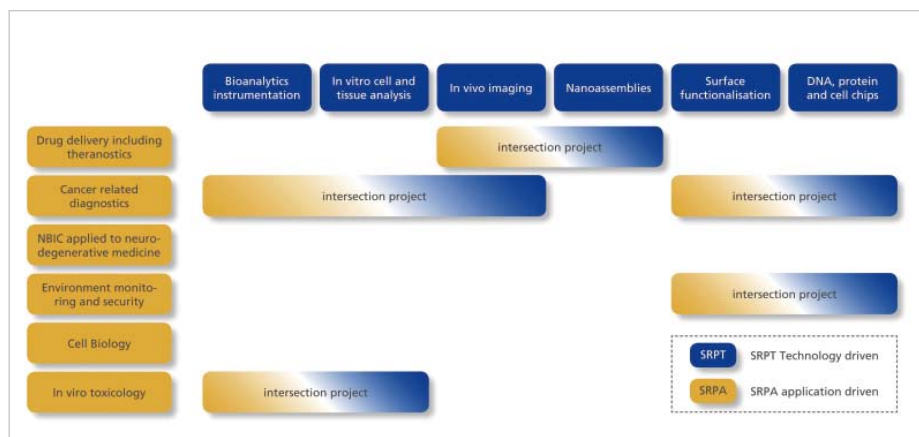


Fig. 1: Twelve strategic research programs (SRP) provide a platform for researchers within the network.

The network Nano2Life (founded in 2004) is the first European Network of Excellence supported by the European Commission under the 6th Framework Programme in the field of nanobiotechnology. Its objective is to merge existing European expertise and knowledge in order to maintain Europe's status as a competitive partner and to make it a leader in nanobiotechnology.

Network of Multidisciplinary Collaborations

Twenty three partners from twelve different countries are involved in this network. There are about two hundred scientists from multidisciplinary fields who participate in the various meetings and activities.

The research work of N2L is organized in twelve strategic research programs (SRP) which provide a platform for researchers within the network to develop durable collaborations. Six of the SRP focus on research in novel technologies, while the other six focus on elaboration of the applications to which the technologies can contribute. For example the researchers from the "bio-chip" group interact with the "in vitro toxicology" group in an intersection project "cytotoxicity on a chip" to carry out complete cytotoxicity assays based on mammalian cells on a chip. Other groups are working in topics like cancer diagnostics, surface functionalisation and nanopatterning or bioanalytics. So the partners benefit from the multidisciplinary approach as well as from the know how of the resources from the cen-

tres of excellence in nanobiotechnology that make up the network. "A continuous effort to facilitate the interaction between scientists and experts of different disciplines is what the activity is all about. Once a biologist, as an example, is discussing biological issues with an engineer or a physicist, new concepts, approaches and vertical fertilization occurs.", says Patrick Boisseau, the coordinator of Nano2Life. Therefore the communication and networking activities are another focus beside the research activities. "The challenges are to establish open lines communication among the participants, creating a productive work infrastructure and to handle the different cultural and scientific backgrounds." How can this be achieved in a scientific, high-technology network?

Human Resource Management

Everybody in charge is invited to participate in a human resource management course named "Progress" to ensure that these challenges are met. The participants gain practical experience and a deeper understanding of leadership issues typical for heterogeneous group situations. They learn how individual behaviour and group dynamics influence a team's performance as a whole and how to lead and motivate a team successfully. As well participants are trained in conflict resolution and gain insight into how similarities as well as differences impact individual relationships. Taking in account the special needs and wishes of the network and the EC, gender issues are as well a focus in the training.

E-Mentoring for Young Scientists

Another activity to link the partners in Nano2Life is through e-mentoring. The e-Mentor programme aims to utilise the knowledge and experience of more seasoned colleagues. So far 13 mentors have been paired up with younger scientists throughout Europe. It is a mutual give and take of knowledge and experience facilitated through e-mail exchanges for a period of about 12 months. Face-to-face meetings are also possible, e.g. at meetings arranged by Nano2Life. Within these activities topics like research problems but as well information how to write an EC-proposals are discussed.

Innovative Interaction

There are two annual scientific meetings where young scientists can meet with their more experienced colleagues from different disciplines. Already the first meetings showed that more active communication among participants was needed than the usual poster sessions. More and more activities and tools are tested therefore to facilitate the information exchange. The poster sessions for example are turning into the Nano2Life Bazaar. One tool to support this Bazaar is an exercise called "elevator pitch" which is often used by companies trying to attract venture capital in such events. Here the speaker has 30 seconds (time until the elevator stops) to present a project idea convincingly. In Nano2Life, the "elevator" climbs more floors – exhibitors have up to five minutes for their presentation. This approach is quite popular among younger scientists as it not only allows them to present their work to a high-level audience but also provide an opportunity to practice their presentation skills.

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