

The Future of FEAST

FEAST Discussion Paper 5/11

27 April 2011

Dr Rado Faletič¹

Mr Jean–François Desvignes–Hicks²

¹ Rado Faletič, Executive Director, FEAST, info@feast.org, +61 2 6125 7885.

² Jean–François Desvignes–Hicks, Special Advisor, FEAST



This project is supported by *International Science Linkages* established under the Australian Government's innovation statement, *Backing Australia's Ability*, and has received funding from the European Commission's *Seventh Framework Programme, Capacities: International Cooperation (222747)*.

Introduction

With the end of FEAST's current contract on the horizon, and the fact that there are a number of exciting international issues in a state of flux or development, it is an appropriate time to report and assess FEAST's achievements and what its suite of future services might be, and what would be a good model going forward.

In December 2010 a group of FEAST's stakeholders met in Canberra, at a workshop designed to examine FEAST's role and achievements, and to discuss the current and emerging needs of the research community relevant to FEAST's mission.³ This paper draws on those discussions, in addition to other dialogues between FEAST and its stakeholders, so that all interested individuals and organisations may provide comment on issues relating to the future of FEAST.

History

The beginning (FEAST)

In 2000, the then scientific attaché at the Embassy of France in Canberra, Alain Moulet, proposed the creation of a one-stop-shop for information about grants and schemes relevant to French-Australian research collaborations. This idea was quickly embraced by the Australian Government and the Delegation of the European Commission to Australia and New Zealand, and became a much broader initiative covering all European nations, including the European Commission's own programs.

The first FEAST event, *Enhancing research through collaboration linkages*, was held in May 2001 at the Australian Academy of Science.⁴ Several Ministers attended this significant event, and many of the European embassies contributed towards the participation of European researchers. The major outcome was the securing of funding to establish the FEAST unit.

With funding from the Australian Government and the European Commission, the first FEAST project began in 2002 with Alliance Française as the host organisation and Michael Parker as the first Executive Director.⁵

This first phase of FEAST saw the establishment of the FEAST website, the development of seminars on collaborating with Europe, and the creation of the FEAST-France sub-network. The purpose of FEAST-France was to bring together researchers, in Australia, who had collaborations with France in order to share success strategies and information about useful programs. This was run centrally from the Embassy of France.

The European Commission conducted an assessment of FEAST in 2004,⁶ with the main recommendation being that the initiative be continued, and also extended to other nations with which the European Union has strong scientific relations.

The consolidation (FEAST II)

With a larger budget and expanded staff and program, FEAST II began in 2005 after a hiatus of several months since the end of the previous contract. The project was hosted by The Australian National University, with Neil Hamilton as the new Executive Director.⁷

The ambitious expansion of activities included the development of a helpdesk facility, the creation of additional bilateral sub-networks, a number of communication activities on European opportunities (primarily seminars and newsletters), the development of a comprehensive projects database, and complete redesign of the FEAST website.⁸

FEAST's helpdesk facility proved highly in demand – consisting of face-to-face meetings with individuals and groups, as well as email and telephone correspondence. The majority of requests were in relation to Australian involvement with the EU's Framework Programmes, particularly on issues such as eligibility and funding. This engagement not only provided a valuable service to the Australian research community, it also allowed FEAST staff to build up a case log consisting of success stories as well as negative experiences and difficulties.

Expanding the FEAST-France sub-network concept to other countries delivered mixed results. In particular, it appears that cultural differences influence the way researchers view the role of networking groups such as these sub-networks. Some of the sub-networks resulted

³ Details and presentations from this workshop can be found on the FEAST website at www.feast.org/ff2010.

⁴ www.science.org.au/publications/newsletters/documents/AAS50.PDF

⁵ cordis.europa.eu/search/?fuseaction=proj.document&PJ_RCN=5329092

⁶ ec.europa.eu/comm/research/iscp/pdf/feast-assessment-report_en.pdf

⁷ cordis.europa.eu/search/?fuseaction=proj.document&PJ_RCN=7980421

⁸ Archives of the FEAST website can be found at the National Library of Australia at <http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-35648>.

in a rarely utilised email list (eg FEAST–UK), whilst others were able to develop a community of regional coordinators who hosted the occasional meeting or seminar (eg FEAST–Germany). Overall, however, without strong input from the relevant communities, and where appropriate, the Embassies, such networks were difficult to maintain and provided only marginal benefit to bilateral collaborative efforts, if any. The recent development of the Swiss Australian Academic Network (SAAN) and the alumni network of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) demonstrates that such networks must both meet a strong demand and have a clear mandate supported by a national organisation.

There were three high-level thematic workshops held during FEAST II. These were in the fields of higher cognition in animals, ICT, and creative industries.⁹ The main purpose of these events was to bring together European and Australian researchers who might not otherwise have know of each others' capabilities, in emerging research areas where there were clear opportunities for collaboration. These events have all led to quality joint publications between participating researchers and to some ongoing investigator driven collaborations. However, given their costs these activities' return on investment was minimal. Any future workshops will only be of value to the wider research community by integrating them to existing sectoral roadmapping initiatives and partnerships in Australia.

In addition to these thematic workshops FEAST ran a nationwide workshop roadshow across most capital cities as well as a number of regional cities.¹⁰ These events were designed, primarily, to deliver information and advice about FP7 that was relevant to an Australian audience. It also allowed FEAST to present results of its initial work on best practices for engagement with FP7 (more about this later). These events were well received, the results being that Australian researchers were given the information they required in order to determine if, and how, they might consider engaging with FP7 projects. During the course of the roadshow it became obvious there was an increasing discrepancy between the seminar audience and the type of researchers involved in FP6 and FP7 projects. Many people were attending the workshops in the hope of learning about how they could

fund research in Australia via European funding programs. On the other hand, relatively few of the attendees were interested in using information provided by FEAST to enhance their strategic research collaborations. Solutions to this mismatch were not discovered until the subsequent contract.

Inside the FEAST secretariat at ANU, a large percentage of time was spent on developing both the database of projects, and the new FEAST website. Both initiatives enabled FEAST to greatly increase its presence on the internet, and facilitated greater interaction with interested researchers. In fact, the FEAST website was identified by the European Commission, internally, as an example of best-practice design and functionality for such organisations.

A new direction (FEED)

Mark Matthews took over as Executive Director in the final year of FEAST II, and brought with him new ideas to improve FEAST's services. These led to a new direction for FEAST when it began its third contract, FEED, also hosted by ANU.¹¹ Most significantly, in addition to the existing 'core' FEAST activities (helpdesk, website, seminars, etc), this new project included policy-oriented activities.

In particular, access to various publication databases – initially via a local collaboration with Research Evaluation and Policy Project (REPP) at ANU, and subsequently with the Australian Government Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR) – enabled FEAST to explore the nature of Australia's international collaborations via publication and citation data. FEAST was able to map and compare Australian and European areas of relative excellence, and provide tools to help identify potential countries and thematic areas for policy-makers to target. This work, the analysis and the findings, have been published as a series of highly successful discussion papers, and has helped officials in both the European Commission and the Australian Government form more robust evidence-based decisions and policies with regards to international collaboration issues. Policy makers and research organisations, worldwide, regularly cite FEAST's work in this area.

Following on from lessons learnt during FEAST II, one of the major activities of FEED has been the development of

⁹ Full details, and outcomes, of these workshops can be found on the FEAST website at www.feast.org/workshops.

¹⁰ www.feast.org/seminars/2007

¹¹ cordis.europa.eu/search/?fuseaction=proj.document&PJ_RCN=10361800

a set of best practice strategies and tactics for Australian involvement in FP7. This was achieved via an extensive survey of almost half of the Australian participants in FP7, both successful and unsuccessful, and across all thematic areas. This survey allowed for the capture of easily quantifiable responses, such as numbers of publications, as well as more qualitative anecdotes, such as the 'story' of how each project came about and how the Australian partner became involved. Whilst many of the responses were anticipated, a number of surprising facts emerged early during the survey process that warranted further attention. In particular, it was revealed that the vast majority of these Australian participants had not sought advice from FEAST or their local research management team, and as a consequence had relied almost exclusively on their European counterpart for their information. Unfortunately, nearly three quarters of the people surveyed had been given misinformation by their European colleagues (most likely innocently, or through a lack of understanding as to the exact rules for Australian participation, however FEAST suspects that such misinformation was on occasion deliberate). The complete set of results were published as a discussion paper, along with a number of simple strategies for optimising involvement with FP7, which has become the most highly downloaded FEAST paper to date.

This survey was used to instruct FEAST in the development of a management system for researchers to use in order to track their progress through their FP7 participation, as well as anticipate upcoming requirements and find relevant documentation.¹² At the time of writing this paper, this checklist was still in beta testing, so results of its uptake were not available. It is anticipated that use of this checklist facility will enable FEAST to monitor the progress of FP7 applications by Australian researchers, and determine how, and if, FEAST is able to assist them develop optimal engagement strategies.

During this contract, FEAST staff were given the status of being official FP7 National Contact Points (NCP) for Australia.¹³ This has resulted in staff being on the whole more connected to relevant thematic networks in Europe (via email lists and other internet resources), and increased FEAST's exposure and expertise regarding Australian involvement in FP7. Consequently, there has

been an increase in the number, and the quality, of helpdesk queries, particularly from European coordinators seeking to include Australian teams in their FP7 project proposals.

The culmination of a number of circumstances – roadshow conducted during FEAST II, the FEED survey, FEAST's NCP status, etc – led to the realisation that there could be much to gain by targeting workshops to the research management community in Australia. The rationale being that such individuals were ideally placed to locally inform and support researchers, and that conducting workshops exclusively for them would increase their awareness of key issues, and also raise their own profile with their researchers. During 2010 a second roadshow was conducted, again visiting most of the capital cities, in collaboration with the Australasian Research Management Society (ARMS) for the benefit of their members. Research management staff were also able to provide FEAST with input in the development of subsequent training workshops for research managers as well as for researchers.

Other projects (SECAS, EURASIAPAC, AUS-ACCESS4EU, PACE-Net)

Given FEAST's central role in supporting European–Australian scientific collaborations, it was only natural that it become involved in other, related, projects. These include the various Europe Centres at Australian universities, as well as other FP7 projects established to explore opportunities with Australia. In particular, there have been two ICT mapping projects (SECAS¹⁴ and EURASIAPAC¹⁵) and a Europe–Pacific scientific collaborations network (PACE-Net¹⁶). Despite obvious synergies, time and resource constraints prevented FEAST from assuming leading role in these projects.

The project with which FEAST has had most involvement, and integration, however, has been AUS-ACCESS4EU¹⁷, an initiative aimed at assessing Australia's openness with regards to its research funding programs and individual researcher fellowships, as well as at promoting Australian research opportunities to European researchers. FEAST's relationship with relevant funding agencies in Australia, as well as its established work in bibliometrics, has

¹² www.feast.org/members/fp7checklist

¹³ www.feast.org/fp7/ncp

¹⁴ www.secas.eu

¹⁵ eurasiapac-fp7.eu

¹⁶ www.pacenet.eu

¹⁷ www.aus-access4.eu

proved valuable in the context of this project. FEAST staff have also been able to attend workshops and seminars in Europe, as a part of the AUS-ACCESS4EU project, to highlight and promote aspects of research collaboration with Australia.

The future

Discussions with stakeholders over recent months has led FEAST to conclude that now is an appropriate time to reinvigorate a number of its core competencies. The FEED project has allowed FEAST to explore new areas, and add a policy dimension to its portfolio of services, but at the same time focus has been shifting away from areas including information provision of bilateral opportunities, and researcher-targeted seminars.

This realisation has led to the formulation of a 'two-tiered' model for future operations of FEAST. The two tiers would consist of a 'core' and an 'à la carte' services component, as described below.

Core

FEAST was built on the notion of a central body providing services (in particular information and advice) to facilitate engagement with the plethora of European programs and opportunities relevant to Australian researchers. This ought to include close collaboration with European member state governments and organisations, in addition to the EC, in order to deliver relevant information via the FEAST website, as well as through seminars and workshops (both targeted directly to researchers and for the purpose of training research management staff). Participation in the AUS-ACCESS4EU project has also opened up the possibility of integrating the work of that project, namely information about Australian funding opportunities open to European participants, into this core activity.

Throughout universities and agencies across Australia, the level of formal participation in European initiatives (particularly FP7) is not great enough within any one institution for them to be able to justify retaining staff or commissioning consultants to support these engagements. FEAST is able to provide support to these institutions collectively.

The second core mission of FEAST is to liaise with major Australian research organisations (universities, agencies) and other stakeholders in Australia and Europe. As the European Commission enhances and clarifies the role of

third country NCPs, FEAST staff will have greater access to key data about Australian involvement with European programs and shared expertise within European support networks. This will allow FEAST to continue to monitor and analyse collaborative activities, and be pro-active about providing support and solutions to those researchers involved (including through targeted workshops).

These services would be actively supported and enhanced by information sessions across Australia, and Europe where applicable, presenting at major Australian research organisations (universities, agencies) no less than once per 24 months, and usually once per year for institutions such as those universities in the Group of Eight. Further presentations would continue to be prepared and delivered on demand, as requested, including at major events such as the ARMS annual conferences.

Since the FEAST website is central to all of FEAST's information services, and the rise of social networking platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn and ResearchGATE has made it easier for researchers across the globe to remain connected with relevant information and each other, the next iteration of the FEAST website ought to build provision for linking directly with existing social networking platforms, such as the ones mentioned. This will enable a greater transfer of relevant information to those seeking it and/or requiring it, and better enable the research community to share information amongst themselves.

À la carte services

The main point of separating the 'core' from 'à la carte' services is that the core activities are constant and perpetual, whereas these additional services are performed only when needed. These activities would be carried out as either specific once-off projects for the relevant government agency (primarily for the Australian Government or the European Commission), or as part of a suite of specific services delivered under any future BILAT, ACCESS4EU, or other, appropriate call. Ideally, such services would each report to a single funder (rather than the current situation of requiring to report to both the EC and DIISR, despite the fact that many of the specific services are of more relevance to one body than the other).

The primary class of such additional services are those relating to policy issues in international science, such as the bibliometric work completed in FEED, and the reciprocity work conducted in AUS-ACCESS4EU. The outcomes of the recent FEAST/UQ Symposium 2011 on *Enhancing interoperability in the emerging global research order* provides a basis for future policy directions in the changing landscape of international science.¹⁸

Other considerations

During the AUS-ACCESS4EU project FEAST has had successful collaboration with other groups involved in the project consortium, including the German Aerospace Center (DLR, which hosts the International Bureau of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research), the British Council and CSIRO. With the project being coordinated in Europe, by DLR, FEAST has first-hand experienced the advantages of having a European partner be responsible for project coordination. Such advantages include the savings made on management operations due to the expertise and the existence of fit for purpose systems of the European partners. It also provides a much-needed permanent presence in Europe. It is therefore likely that FEAST will seek to establish such an arrangement in any future calls where appropriate. This also increases the feasibility of having multiple project partners based in Australia, depending on the extent of funding available and the nature of the specific call objectives and requirements.

During the Australian Parliament's recent *Inquiry into Australia's international research collaboration*,¹⁹ one of the major initiatives proposed, by FEAST and other bodies and individuals, was the establishment of a permanent agency that would "... act as a conduit between Australian researchers and overseas research organisations and funding bodies." Particular interest has been expressed in providing a similar service for collaborations with the USA, including private foundations, as FEAST does for Europe. Given that FEAST already operates within this space, it is foreseeable that the creation of any such unit could involve either building upon FEAST's existing systems and expertise, or could seek to include FEAST into its larger operational framework. In either case, the FEAST model, and its future activities, will be an asset to any such agency.

Open for comment and feedback

FEAST encourages all interested individuals and organisations (agencies, universities, etc) in both Australia and Europe to consider the information provided in this document and to contact FEAST (info@feast.org) with comments and suggestions for the future development of the unit. It is likely that the European Commission will open the next BILAT call in mid-2011 (for projects to start during 2012), so suggestions regarding possible project partners and proposal content are particularly welcome.

¹⁸ www.feast.org/symposium2011

¹⁹ www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/isi/intresearch