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## A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO BEST PRACTICES IN RESEARCH TRAINING NETWORKS

### 1. INTRODUCTION

It is undoubted that **Research Training Network (RTN) can have a major impact on career prospects of Young Researchers** involved, strengthen the links between the participating nodes and - in the long run – **help paving the way towards a knowledge-based society and competitive economy**. In other words RTN projects are an investment in the future with the Young researchers as the most important actors.

The contractual framework for RTNs **leaves great liberty to the networks** for the concrete implementation and there are thus considerable differences in the way projects are managed. This might depend to a certain extent on the characteristics of a certain academic discipline, the cultural and academic traditions in a hosting country or – obviously – on the personalities involved in a project. **These differences are enriching for all projects.**

This text aims at helping all those involved in an RTN to **maximise its potential impact**. The ideas and suggestions that one can find here are not part of any contractual obligations nor can they provide for solutions for all problems that might occur in the course of a project.

Experience has, however, shown that:

- **A good Communication strategy**
- **Active Participation of Young Researchers**
- **Enriching Networking and Training**
- **A strategic planning for each Young Researcher**

can facilitate the implementation of a project for all of the partners and in particular optimise the learning and training experience of the Young Researchers involved in the project.

## 2. A GOOD COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

In all European network projects **communication and transparency is a key element** for successful implementation. Communication concerns the relationship with the responsible **project officer in Brussels**, the **relations between the different scientist in charge and the network as a whole**. *Leitmotiv* should be to be **pro-active and transparent**. All participants – including the Young Researchers – should have **access to the relevant information**. For example the **modalities for secondments, visits, participation at conferences and the different allowances** should be clear to everybody. Key documents like the **project contract and the respective reports** should thus be available to all participants.

In certain projects the co-ordinator is supported by a **contact person available for all administrative or other questions** that might occur. In addition, some projects have opted for nominating a **training programme manager for the whole network** who is more particularly in charge of **coordinating the joint network seminars or workshops**. This way of organising the work is highly appreciated given the fact that for most scientists in charge/network coordinators time is a scarce resource and that the contact persons will give feedback and advice without delay.

Within the Communication strategy a **dynamic web page (incl. researchers section)** can be an efficient way for the **dissemination of the networks activities** to the general public and be a useful tool for the network (publication of vacancies, recruitment, report preparation, on-line tutorials, exchange of data between network partners...). **An E-Newsletter with contributions** from all members **helps to create an identity for the network**. Other modern information technologies (**e- or video-conferences**) might help strengthening the communication flow within the network and should be considered. Obviously these ways of Communication **cannot replace face meetings and contacts**.

Part of the Communication strategy should be to **involve at an early stage** of the project – and if possible at the negotiation – **the administrative departments of the institution** in order to avoid ambiguity, misunderstanding and possible problems while implementing the project.

It should finally be mentioned that the projects should **exploit the possibilities for dissemination of its results to the stakeholders** and decision-makers in the field (e.g. a **final conference or a joint publication** would be an opportunity to do so). This might also help sharpening for the network itself its research focus and the relevance for a larger audience.

## 3. ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG RESEARCHERS

Appropriate measures should be taken to facilitate the **active participation of the young researchers** in the network in general and for the design of training activities in particular. RTN projects normally install a Steering Group in charge of discussing and **deciding about the management aspects** within the project. The young researchers should be encouraged to **nominate “speakers” that could participate for example at the Steering Group meetings** in order to ensure their involvement in the decision making processes of

the network. It could be considered – depending on the network - to have 2 “speakers” for Early Stage and for Experienced Researchers.<sup>1</sup>

Ideally the Young Researchers should take “**ownership**” of their project. The decision-making structure needs to be open for input for example to the design of training activities in order to make sure that this training is oriented towards their needs. The Young Researchers **should be encouraged to take responsibility** within the network activities. This could for example mean the organisation of Young Researchers meeting’s, network training, maintaining or updating websites or any other activity that would be agreed upon. Part of such an approach could be that the young researchers would be encouraged and take it up to develop a planning for secondments and visits taking into consideration their interest and needs as well as practical questions. This could also help to improve the interaction between the nodes on the level of the young researchers.

Active participation of Young Researchers in the project can considerably smooth its implementation. Being actively involved can reinforce the learning effects that reach out far beyond the pure area of research to project and organisational management. It is also quite obvious that the **intercultural learning associated with any European mobility programme** will be even more intense if Young researchers can bring into the project **fully their own experiences and cultural backgrounds**.

#### **4. ENRICHING NETWORKING AND TRAINING**

All mobility programmes like RTNs have a **strong intercultural dimension**. The learning experience of the Young Researchers (**as for all other individuals involved**) is not limited to research and academic teaching. **Going to another country is always a great challenge**. Adequate support should therefore be provided especially in a first phase: **Overcoming administrative hurdles, finding a flat, getting to know the new colleagues... having a peer tutor that would help to find the way** would be appreciated by most Young Researchers.

In other words: Networking starts at the level of the **host institution**. As soon as “basics” are decided and settled the needs for training of the Young Researcher should be **discussed with the scientist in charge of the host institution who takes up the role of a mentor for the Young Researcher**. **Mentoring should be understood as a tool to achieve the research and training objectives** and should at the same time facilitate the integration into the host institution. The **training itself should be tailor-made to the needs of the Young Researcher and take due account of additional skills and competencies** that might NOT be directly related to the research issue (i.e. presentational skills, project management, drafting of project proposals, language courses, ethics, CV writing, job search, interview skills, etc). Training should also **bridge towards other scientific disciplines and other environments** (industrial, field activities, etc, if relevant) and should entail hands on experience wherever possible and pertinent.

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<sup>1</sup> Equal opportunities and gender balance should be considered.

The main training objective remains, however, to provide for training in the relevant discipline and related to the research issue chosen by the project. In addition, to those seminars and training opportunities provided at the host institution the **joint network training will play a major** role in this respect. In most cases this kind of kind of network training will bring together all participants (scientist in charge and Young Researchers) of an RTN. These are therefore also the most important opportunities for networking within the project. Time and effort should be invested in the design of these meetings: They should offer a sufficient **time framework** of several days, have adequate provisions for “**Socialising**” (e.g. through joint dinners) and should foresee time slots for the **networking between the Young Researchers**.<sup>2</sup> As regards the research and training aspects the meetings will also be “laboratories” for the Young Researchers to **present their work** to their peers and the scientists in charge. **External experts** can be invited and might give very useful input and open up to new horizons.

Particular diligence should be attributed to the first network training. Dedicating the first day to **teambuilding** within an intercultural environment could be considered and would possibly be a good investment for cooperation in the network in the years to come. Given the crucial importance of joint network training these events should be scheduled **approximately every 6 months** in order to reinforce the cohesion within the network.

The possibilities for Young Researchers to visit other nodes within the network should be used actively. These **secondments** are not only of benefit for the individual but also for the network as a whole as they efficiently raise the cohesion within the network. The duration of these secondments should be adapted to the needs of the Young researcher and **might range** from several days to several months.

It is important to stress that the **network** is based on a collective research project. This should be demonstrated through **joint research publications involving Young Researchers** and fostering their standing within the scientific community.

Last but not least the **attendance at international conferences** and workshops that can be funded through the RTN project should be mentioned. While going beyond the RTNs borders the Young researchers will have the opportunity to broaden their horizons and get acquainted with other scientific approaches. There might, in addition, be opportunities to present one’s scientific project and the work of the network.

The above considerations on networking and training show the rich potential of learning opportunities that can be offered to a Young Researcher within an RTN project. It should be stressed that experience has shown that real impact can only be achieved if the **duration of the recruitment** is sufficiently long. Whereas the contract provisions stipulate that recruitments in FP6 can be done for periods between 3 months and 3 years it can be assumed that recruitments of around 2 years for Early Stage Researchers and 1 year for Experienced Researchers are necessary to exploit the learning and training opportunities offered by a network fully. By the way a further observation is that the **collaboration between Early Stage Researchers and Experienced Researchers** within a network has an important function with regard to the cohesion of the network mutual support and is

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<sup>2</sup> For practical reasons these meetings will in most cases also allow for coordination meetings between coordinator, the scientists in charge and representatives (or “speakers”) of the Young Researchers.

beneficial of the project as a whole. The Experienced Researchers often bridge towards the network coordinator and the various scientist in charge.

## 5. A STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR EACH YOUNG RESEARCHER

Part of the provisions for Research Training Networks in the 6<sup>th</sup> Research Framework programme is **that a so-called Career Development Plan (CDP)** would be established for each Young Researcher. A planning should be drawn up in cooperation between the scientists in charge and the Young Researchers taking stock of their training needs and outlining possible further career steps.

The Young Researchers should be actively supported in developing a strategy for their involvement in the RTN project and beyond. It is, however, left open – given the richness of possible approaches towards such a CDP - how such a Career Development Plan could actually look like.

Some guiding principles could be that a **Career Development Plan...**

- should define clear, ambitious and achievable **objectives**
- should outline **concrete steps** (training, publications, tasks to be carried out etc.) to be taken
- should take into consideration efficient use of the **Career Development Allowance**
- should be based on an agreed **time schedule**
- should be **reviewed regularly**
- should **cover the period of recruitment** in the RTN project and open up **perspectives for the time afterwards**

## 6. FINAL REMARK

In many cases participation in an RTN project has been an important step in the career of a Young Researcher. It should also be mentioned that **participation in training should be properly recorded and recognised** in order to make maximum use of the learning in the future career. **Optimising the impact** of a period in a European project is clearly in the interest of all those contributing to its success.

The above considerations with regard to Best Practices in RTN go beyond the contractual obligations of the partners. However, numerous contacts with the networks show that there is a lot of **enthusiasm and commitment from all participants** to run the projects in the best possible way. **Active participation**, taking responsibility and accepting the **rights and obligations** that are resulting from a joint project appear to be a key to the success for a network.

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