



**REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND SPORTS
NATIONAL AGENCY FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND INNOVATION
NATIONAL PROGRAMS DIRECTORATE**

Fellowship Report – Enhancing Academia-Business Collaboration: Lessons from Austria

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Organization sending: NASRI, Tirana, Albania

Organization hosting: FFG, Vienna, Austria

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Introduction

As part of the activities under Task 5.2 of the project, a short-term fellowship was carried out in Austria with the objective of exploring best practices in fostering academia-business collaboration, with a particular focus on joint scientific projects and support mechanisms. The fellowship, which took place in collaboration with the Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG), aimed to gather practical insights and tools that could be adapted to the Albanian context, particularly in supporting national grant programmes. The main objective of the fellowship possibility is to build capacities on R&I management and other POLICY ANSWERS related topics for the partners and to forge closer relationships between the project consortium. This activity is a sub-task under T5.5 Regional Innovation Academy. As the budget for the travel costs was preliminarily allocated to ZSI, the partner also coordinated the process.

The **main topic** of the fellowship was focussed on collaboration possibilities between academia and business, especially how to best approach SMEs (and to involve them in R&D projects).

As a fellow, I was interested on gaining experience on the entire regulatory framework, practices and procedures for the financing of academia-business projects, with a special focus on SMEs, expanding both professional and personal networks, experiential learning and professional development.

The **expected objectives** were:

- To discuss about SMEs involvement in R&D projects, as it is one of the main priorities and management of national grants that is essential for mobility
- To learn from the FFG's (or other Austrian organisations) best practices related to the entire process of financing academia-business projects financed with national grants, in order to improve NASRI's practice for a successful science-business collaboration in Albania

- To have (possibly) access to the Manual(s) of Procedures (guidelines, lists of evaluation criteria, guidelines for evaluators, for progress monitoring and so on) and to practically learn and discuss about rules and administrative procedures of FFG's practice on science-business projects
- To participate in meetings/visits with/to institutions or SMEs with successful history in the implementation of joint scientific projects with academia

Main Activities and Outputs

1. Desk Research and Interviews

During the fellowship, a combination of desk research and qualitative interviews was used to collect relevant data.

- a. Meeting at FFG Dr. Emmanuel Glenck, Head of Division of Thematic Programmes and DI. Georg Niklfeld Group Leader Digital Thematic Programmes Discussion and agreement with Mr. Glenck on the agenda as well as the main issues of particular interest to be addressed during this fellowship.
 - "FFG in a nutshell" was the first presentation by DI. Georg Niklfeld from the Thematic Programs Department. From the presentation and subsequent discussion with Mr. Niklfeld, I gained valuable information regarding The Austrian R&I eco-system key elements and FFG positioning within the R&I governance system (federal level);
 - Mission of FFG in supporting the sustainable future of the Austrian economy & society with (financial) resources and know-how for research, technology, innovation, infrastructure and digitalization, and its development history;
 - Organisational structure, budget, key features of FFG RDI funding, portfolio and funding leverage;
 - Collaborates and projects on many levels: a) national level (Green Frontrunner“, Quantum Austria Initiative“ with FWF, IPCEIs with aws, EBIN (low GHG emission buses plus infrastructure) with SCHIG, Chips Initiative (based on Chips Act) with aws, Industrial Transformation with KPC, IMPA (European Missions- implementation on national level) with FWF and ÖAW; b) regional level (COMET-joint funding FFG and regions, General programme—several models of cooperation with regions, Thematic calls implemented for regions European and international level, ERA nets, ERA learn, Partnerships incl. co-fundings, etc).
 - RDI funding instruments;
 - Keeping track on outcomes and impacts;
 - Thematic programmes and their missions; investments focussing on transformation;
 - Target groups for R&D projects;
 - Main priority fields of Thematic programmes.
 - Guideline cooperative R& D projects
- b. COMET Competence Centers
 - Of greater interest was the presentation about COMET Competence Centers that conduct cutting-edge, application-oriented research at the highest level, in areas of strategic

importance to the Austrian economy and develop solutions for the key issues of the future. The COMET program combines scientific expertise and technological know-how in three strands. In COMET, companies collaborate with research partners within a very specific research area, enabling the direct transfer of new knowledge into innovative prototypes. The goal is to subsequently create marketable results. COMET centers provide fresh research impetus, initiate new product, process, and service innovations, and thereby improve companies' innovative capacity. They work together on key technologies of the future, such as energy, high-tech materials, the circular economy, artificial intelligence, life sciences, microelectronics, production technologies, robotics, etc.

- During the meeting, it was discussed whether NASRI could apply a similar funding model like COMET. In this case, NASRI should give money to the companies (became AIDA). But, in the current status, NASRI does not directly finance the business but the HEI. In this case, NASRI can setup research structures with funding that is especially attractive to companies, like Austrian COMET Competence Centers. But, the **COMET** model can be adapted in Albania during the creation of Centers of Excellence, foreseen in the Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation.
- Comet Centre Call Guideline

2. Step-by-Step Guide for Managing Academia-Business Projects

- a. Visit at FWF premises and meeting with Mr. Ch. Bärenreuter.
 - An overview of FWF presented by Mr. Ch. Bärenreuter.
 - FWF as Austria's main institution for funding basic research.
 - Funding portfolio
 - Cross – Program Funding Options
 - The application and decision – making processes
 - Application Guidelines
 - Review process: principles, reviewer selection.
 - Funding decisions
 - Steps after the approval and after decision.
 - Exercise: Finding the match between NASRI's and FWF R&D funding instruments portfolio
- b. FFG premises. With Mr. E. Glenck working on finding an idea to better link academia – business.
 - Open days in HEI-s for business – they have to know each other
 - Info about European Researchers' Night – by Ms. I. Gavarane.
About events in 2025 : <https://marie-sklodowska-curie-actions.ec.europa.eu/actions/msca-citizens/join-a-celebration-of-science>
Call for 2026/2027 <https://marie-sklodowska-curie-actions.ec.europa.eu/calls/msca-and-citizens-european-researchers-night-and-researchers-at-schools-2026-2027>.
 - Drafting a plan for NASRI to organize one day activity about S +B collaboration – with Mr. Glenck.
- c. Meeting with Joanneum Research (JR), Austria representatives: Mr. Michael Ploder - Director of the Policies Institute, Institute for Economic, Social and Innovation Research at Joanneum Research and Ms. Enikoe Linshalm - Deputy Research Group Leader at JR.

- Joanneum Research provides innovation and technology services in the field of applied research. As a research company working on behalf of various federal provinces and regions in Austria, its expertise shapes the development of our modern society and economy – sustainably, and always with a focus on people.
 - Discussing and sharing ideas about how NASRI can apply and participate in EU projects.
 - Discussing and sharing ideas and best practices about how NASRI can improve evaluation of R& D funding schemes, focused on Academia-Business Projects.
 - Evaluation of national R&D proposals
- d. Meeting at ZSI premises with Mag. Dr. Klaus Schus, Scientific director of ZSI and Dr. Inese Gavarane, M.Ed., MBA, ZSI-Zentrum für Soziale Innovation GmbH.**
- ZSI in a nutshell
 - Social Innovation
 - Transformative Research
 - Digitalisation
 - Policy analysis and evaluation
 - Sustainable development goals and societal development
 - Internationalization on R&I
 - Science Diplomacy.
 - Presentation of ongoing LUKE project (European-Ukrainian partnership project).
 - Interactive discussion about science-business collaboration programmes.
 - Discussing Innovation Voucher regarding science-business calls and Austrian scheme.
 - Evaluation of funding programs and RTDI national ecosystems

3. Networking Meeting with Austrian Stakeholders

A targeted networking meetings and visits were held with several Austrian institutions. The meeting allowed for an exchange of experiences and fostered contacts for future cooperation.

FFG - with Dr. Emmanuel Glenck, Head of Division of Thematic Programmes and DI. Georg Niklfeld Group Leader Digital Thematic Programmes

FWF – with Dr. Christoph Bärenreuter -Program Manager, Strategy - International Programs.

Joanneum Research (JR), Austria with Dr. Michael Ploder - Director of the Policies Institute, Institute for Economic, Social and Innovation Research at Joanneum Research and Mag.^a. Enikoe Linshalm - Deputy Research Group Leader at JR.

Zentrum für Soziale Innovation (ZSI) with Mag. Dr. Klaus Schus, Scientific director of ZSI and Dr. Inese Gavarane, M.Ed., MBA, ZSI-Zentrum für Soziale Innovation GmbH.

Austrian Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy (BMWFW) with Mr. Christian Gollubits, Senior Advisor at the Department for International Research Co-operation at the BMWFW

4. Draft Cooperation Agreement

As a final outcome, concrete ideas for potential collaboration with our Austrian partners through joint projects were discussed.

- The LUKE initiative seems to be interesting to NASRI and to bring us closer to the networking with the R&I funding agencies. We will contact Jörn Grünewald (Joern.Gruenewald@dlr.de), the coordinator of the LUKE project from DLR Project Management Agency, Germany.
- European Network of Innovation Agencies (Taftie) Membership of NASRI. I already contacted Ian Cresswell, Chair Taftie Membership Policy Group (MPG) and we agreed on the future steps to follow for NASRI Membership at Taftie.
- Participation of NASRI and HEIs at European Researchers' Night initiative on 26 September 2025.
- Possibilities for NASRI to benefit from Science Europe application for funding agencies (contact Dr. Christoph Bärenreuter from FWF);
- Possibilities for NASRI to benefit from services of ERA-LEARN (contact Dr. Emmanuel Glenck from FFG).

ERA-LEARN is a support platform for the R&I partnership community, funded as a support action (CSA) by Horizon Europe. The current phase is a 4-year initiative (2023-2027), following up on several previous phases of ERA-LEARN since 2009. ERA-LEARN reaches out to all stakeholders including policy level, network managers, and researchers. ERA-LEARN operates a unique database of partnership initiatives, calls and funded projects. The ERA-LEARN portal provides guidance and practical information on Partnerships together with manuals, tools, reports and good practice examples on governance models and legal issues, the implementation of joint calls, and additional activities carried out by the Partnerships.

Conclusion

This fellowship provided a unique opportunity to gain practical knowledge and establish a solid basis for ongoing cooperation with Austrian partners. The insights gathered will directly contribute to enhancing the design and implementation of national programmes in Albania, with a special focus on strengthening academia-business links.

Gaining experience on the entire regulatory framework, practices and procedures for the funding of academia-business projects, expanding both professional and personal networks, experiential learning and professional development, it was the greatest benefit for me, both on a professional and a human level.

Strengthening the partnership with Austrian colleagues and opportunities for new collaborations were among the most important results of this experience.

Best practices from FFG, FWF related to the entire process of funding academia-business projects by national grants, in order to improve NASRI's practice for a successful science-business collaboration in Albania, were very useful in improving the work of NASRI and fulfilling the IPA Twinning Project recommendations.

Johanneum Research (JR)'s and Zentrum für Soziale Innovation (ZSI)'s, experience in participating in European networks and projects, is a good guide for NASRI to grow as an institution through membership in funding agency networks, as well as applying for joint projects.

Acknowledgments

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DI. Georg Niklfeld from the Thematic Programs Department, FFG, for a detailed presentation of Austrian R&I eco-system key elements and FFG positioning within the R&I governance system (federal level) and also for the guidelines and other documents provided to me.

A special thank you to Mag. Dr. Klaus Schus, Scientific director of ZSI, Dr. Christoph Bärenreuter Program Manager, Strategy - International Programs at FWF, Dr. Michael Ploder - Director of the Policies Institute Johanneum Research (JR) and Mr. Christian Gollubits, Senior Advisor at the Department for International Research Co-operation at the BMWFW, in the allotted time and remarkable insight on the topics we discussed.

Last but not least, thank you Mag.^a. Enikoe Linshalm - Deputy Research Group Leader at JR and Dr. Inese Gavarane, M.Ed., MBA, ZSI-Zentrum für Soziale Innovation, for the pleasant company and friendship, for the passion and professionalism with which you do your work, which, in a way, you transferred to me as well.

This experience generated a lot of new information and ideas for the remodeling and repositioning of NASRI, which I can't wait to put into practice.

Thank you all!