

Interview with Michael J. Galsworthy

Why have you decided to realise your lecture in Slovakia?

When CLS first got in touch with me telling me how useful they found one of my papers, I happily shared my other work with them. This led to us getting into discussions - and we clearly held similar opinions and desires to do something about the situation. Then they proposed that I come and lecture in Kosice.

At first I thought nothing would come of their suggestion, but they quickly proved themselves to be enthusiastic and efficient with organisation. They gave a strong impression of being real "can do" people. That makes a huge difference.

Personally, I am passionate about Eastern European science because I had lived in Slovenia for 5 years, working on two different EU-funded international grants. I know the hardship and I also know the capability of the people. One of the projects was to analyse the spending and outcomes of EU-funded life sciences projects. Seeing the vast East-West funding differences led me to dig deeper and deeper into the policy, and I was shocked at some of what I found on both Commission levels and national government levels. I am keen to do this lecture because I believe it is important to start linking the information, Commission and grassroots initiatives together to help forge more inventive ways to get Eastern Europe on track to fulfil its huge scientific potential.

What is the main message of your research?

My main message is that Eastern European governments are letting their scientists down by underpayment of salaries, poor plans and lack of interest. The Commission makes the situation worse by matching their salary payment to the local level. This causes a lot of brain drain. It means that Eastern European scientists cannot get good pay in their own country – even if it's from an EU central fund. However, because of the mobility mechanisms and international projects, good Eastern European scientists can now more easily get well-paid jobs elsewhere in Europe – and the salary differences are much higher than any living cost differences. So they leave of course. This means that Eastern European research institutions lose their brightest talents, become less competitive, win fewer EU grants, so get less investment. As they increasingly rely on EU funds rather than diminishing national funds (austerity makes this all much worse), so it becomes a downward spiral for money and talent.

Now, you can easily say that the fault lies with the national governments, but you can also say that the Commission should be giving equal pay for equal work because that's what true competition is. The Commission are actually doing a lot to try and stimulate Eastern Europe from the top, like offering national governments support money, but even if the governments did use the money well (and they don't) this is pretty useless when you are pulling the rug out from under their feet by only allowing scientists to earn peanuts unless they migrate to a rich country.

Why have you decided to focus your research precisely on this concrete theme?

This is not the topic of my job. My employment currently concerns improving

surgeries and care in hospitals and evaluating important research directions. However, this Eastern European issue is something I have been investigating for years for no pay because it is tremendously important. Our EU-funded project which ended in 2009 was meant to highlight the best of EU research. We turned that into an analysis of where the money went and what the outputs were. I laboured by myself long after the project ended on that theme of science economics. This threw up the Eastern European issue, which struck a chord with me from my personal experience. I went from there to exploring all the policy documents I could find concerning how the EU planned to fix this dire situation – and found nothing satisfactory. I wrote that up too. This was all done as after-hours work out of personal conviction. However, it has brought me a lot of attention. It is a large, unresolved issue and I am a loud advocate of bringing it to the public eye and dealing with it properly.

What is the added value of your research?

The European Commission is about to start up a new funding programme, called “Horizon 2020” due to run from 2014 to 2020. It will be funded €70 billion. We have worked very hard to formulate innovative and constructive feedback about how they can take their plans up a level. I know recommendations that we have made have been seen by many Commission people and taken on board. To make any policy difference to such a colossal programme translates into a lot of added value.

However, they have mainly paid attention on the informatics front and less on the Eastern European issues. That’s why it is important that there is public communication and debate in Eastern Europe on the salary issue and other aspects where Eastern European researchers can start getting more money under the new programme. One important area is the new emphasis that the Commission is putting on small businesses in science. If Eastern Europe can now network their researchers and small businesses better and hook up with Western institutions, they can start fighting back to where they should be without relying on their governments who all too often are offering them no help on this front.

Also, you should know that there are many people in the Commission who are keen to hear from enthusiastic innovative Eastern European scientists themselves on how to boost competitiveness in the region. All too often they have to deal with politicians who have a very poor understanding of the value of science to the economy. I want to help generate a new enthusiasm for the potential of Eastern Europe and start linking helpful Commission people with dynamic grassroots movements of scientists in Eastern Europe. I have a strong feeling that this will lead to new channels of understanding, support and ultimately the paths to the win-win scenario we all want for Eastern European science within an increasingly impressive European science framework.

That, for me, would be a very satisfying return on all the personal investment I have made fighting for the Eastern European cause.