



The incorporation of ELSO into EMBO sets the stage for The EMBO Meeting, an annual life science conference launching in Amsterdam in 2009. A statement by Carol Featherstone and Kai Simons.

Ten years ago, the European Life Scientist Organization (ELSO) filled an unoccupied niche in the European molecular life science scene. Modelled on the American Society for Cell Biology (ASCB), it attracted a grass-roots membership of individual scientists from Europe and across the world to a large international congress on European soil. What's more, it established strong connections with European science policy makers, thus representing the views of its members to decision-makers in Brussels. Over the past decade, it has contributed to the creation of the European Research Council, lobbied for improvements to the European Commission's Framework Programme and for better opportunities for young European scientists to forge their careers in Europe; it has created a database to promote expert women in the European life sciences, an Early Career Award and a cluster of career events targeted at PhD students and postdocs.

Last ELSO meeting

At the end of this summer, ELSO hosted its seventh international congress, which took place, for the third time, in Nice on the French Côte d'Azur (30th August to 2nd September). The ELSO meetings are now an established event in the diaries of many life scientists, attracting over 1,000 participants, 600 poster presentations and one of the largest exhibition halls in Europe for life science companies. Not to mention a line-up of keynote lecturers, plenary session speakers, minisymposia and subgroup meetings of a quality that rivals any in the field. Over half of the participants are PhD

students or postdocs, demonstrating the need for such a meeting among those who will feed the pipeline to future positions in Europe. This year's congress is a watershed for ELSO, however, as its co-organisation of the meeting with EMBO, the European Molecular Biology Organization, heralds ELSO's fusion at the end of 2008 with this most prestigious and influential of European life science structures.

EMBO the academy

EMBO was founded in 1964, at the birth of the molecular life science era, with the goal of promoting European co-operation in molecular biology and creating a European laboratory that could respond to the challenges of the new technologies. It established the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL, which is now independent

of EMBO) and went on to develop its prestigious programmes of fellowships, courses, workshops and conferences, as well as several journals.

EMBO is, essentially, an academy. It's 1,300-plus members are drawn from the most eminent of Europe's life scientists, elected annually by existing members on the basis of their proven excellence in research. Selection of the most outstanding research and researchers has always been the fundamental criterion for EMBO fellowships, courses and workshops, and most recently, for its Young Investigator Programme. Over the past decade, however, EMBO has begun to reach out more to the wider community of researchers: it now offers its lab management and leadership courses, originally designed for EMBO Young Investigators, to all scientists; it has developed the EMBO Science & Society Programme to facilitate communication between scientists and the general public, and it has become one of the key lobbyists in European science policy, arguing for research funding through the European Research Council and for better support for research infrastructures.

Reaching out

ELSO and EMBO have frequently worked towards shared goals concerning science policy and science careers, and have even worked together in certain efforts within the European Life Science Forum (ELSF) and the Initiative for Science in Europe (ISE). At this point in its development, EMBO is keen to extend its role in the research community by hosting a large international congress. So it makes sense to fo-



cus and concentrate the efforts of ELSO and EMBO in a single organisation. There are so many E-organisations these days – ELSO, EMBO, ELSF, EPSO, ESF, EMBL – enough to confuse the scientists and totally bamboozle the politicians! It is a good time to rationalise and consolidate at least some of these disparate efforts.

A showcase for European research...

ELSO has taken an important lead in developing ways to promote young scientists' careers. Through its Career Development Committee, it has collated a set of web pages providing useful information and links about everything from international PhD programmes to funding sources and mentoring advice. Not least, it has created a fully searchable database of expert women in the life sciences, with the goal of increasing the visibility of Europe's many talented women scientists. The database currently has over 450 entries and is an extremely useful resource for organisations looking to identify expert women scientists to serve on review boards, committees, etc. as well

as female speakers and job candidates. In addition, at the ELSO meeting, there are several career events including a mentoring lunch and a session on careers outside academia that bring added value and interest to the meeting, especially for young researchers. EMBO will continue and develop these activities in the future.

ELSO has always operated on a shoestring with no permanent staff and little structure, making it impossible to expand in the way that the ASCB, for example, has been able to. EMBO is a prestigious and well-financed organisation with a worldwide reputation. It has the headquarters and staff to run a really successful large congress that should attract several thousand researchers to a European venue each year. It has the influence and resources to present the whole of the molecular life science field in an impressive large event, whereas ELSO has been obliged to focus mostly on its 'core' remit of cell and developmental biology. It makes complete sense for EMBO to add a large general molecular life science congress to its already success-

ful portfolio of smaller, focused conferences. The EMBO Meeting will be a showcase for European research, a meeting place for researchers to network, an opportunity for careers training and advice, a place to debate science policy, and a visible flagship bringing the most exciting science to the public's attention.

... and a place for debate

Europe needs this kind of large forum, spanning a broad variety of topics, to bring together its life science community and catch the essence of what is most exciting in our rapidly advancing field. With its seven meetings since 2000, ELSO has demonstrated that it is possible. With *The EMBO Meeting 2009* in Amsterdam (29th August to 1st September), EMBO will build upon ELSO's achievements to create the fully-fledged international molecular life science congress that Europe deserves!

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