

Media release

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Concerns about future European research cooperation

Empa supports Open Letter to Swiss government

In the wake of the recent vote to reject the agreement between Switzerland and the EU on the free movement of persons, Swiss universities have drafted an Open Letter to the Federal Council asking the country's government to do its utmost to ensure that Switzerland remains a full member of the EU's «Horizon 2020» and «Erasmus+» programs. Empa fully supports this appeal.

Clearly, maintaining Swiss participation in these programs represents but one small part of a much larger, far-reaching problem for the country, states the letter, written by representatives of the nation's universities, Federal Institutes of Technology, national academies, universities of applied sciences and colleges of education. But the Federal Council must recognize that the situation for Swiss researchers is both serious and urgent, explained Antonio Loprieno, the President of CRUS, the Rectors' Conference of the Swiss Universities in Bern.

Empa would be affected if any restrictions were imposed

Empa CEO Gian-Luca Bona adds "The EU is one of our prime partners in collaborative research projects – not just for Empa, but also for our partners, Swiss SMEs. A lot of money is at stake here. Empa receives about 10 million Swiss Francs from the EU every year in support of its research activities. Taking into account the 98 million Swiss Francs Empa receives in Federal funding, this represents a significant contribution. If this funding were to be withheld, it would cause a noticeable reduction in our activities."

The institute is also closely linked to the international research scene through its staff. Some 60 per cent of Empa research staff are Swiss citizens, 30 or so per cent originate from the EU and 10 per cent from non-European countries. The staff turnover is high, and if it became necessary to apply individually for a work permit for every new employee, this would drastically increase Empa's administrative burden.

"The situation is difficult, but hopefully we can find a solution," says Gian-Luca Bona, weighing up the state of affairs after the recent referendum. Empa's CEO still holds firmly to the goals of the institute, the primary

objective today being the transfer of scientific discoveries into marketable innovations for and with its industrial partners. "We are dependent on our international cooperative projects, and we need to maintain the free exchange of the very best researchers that we can find. If we don't, our work will be of no value to Swiss industry, which must compete on a globalized market."

ETH and the Swiss National Funds express concern

Ralph Eichler, President of the ETH Zurich, also expressed his concern about the effects on Switzerland's competitive capabilities. "We need to be able to attract the very best people, and to show others that we are among the best, too." Today, the quality of a research organization is measured to a large extent by the success it has, compared to its competitors, in attracting EU funding. The President of the Research Council of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), Martin Vetterli, is apprehensive that "after this catastrophe" the country's research community will not be able to maintain its very high level of quality.

In mid-February the European Union stopped negotiations on the «Horizon 2020» research framework program and the «Erasmus+» student exchange program, as the EU Commission had linked further participation by Switzerland in these programs with the ratification of the agreement on the free movement of Croatian citizens. The Open Letter to the Federal Council has been co-signed by the Rectors of Switzerland's universities, Federal Institutes of Technology, universities of applied sciences and colleges of education.

(Source: sda, Empa)

Editor / Media contact

Rainer Klose, Empa, Communication, Tel. +41 58 765 47 33, redaktion@empa.ch