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By Craig Nicholson

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Ercim fellowships on Research Professional



Opportunity profile: Being part of the international equation

Craig Nicholson talks to programme manager Emma Liere about the benefits of doing a postdoctoral fellowship at an institutional member of the European Research Consortium for Informatics and Mathematics.

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Ercim's Alain Bensoussan Fellowship Programme offers computer science, information technology, and applied mathematics researchers who have completed a PhD in the past eight years the chance to spend 12 months at a European institute in a country of which they are not a national. They will be awarded between €1,230 and €3,550 a month depending on their host institution.

There are two calls annually, each awarding about 10 fellowships. Calls cover dozens of disciplines and are open to people from anywhere in the world who are fluent in English.

The next call will be open for applications from 1 to 30 April, and the second 2016 round will open in September.

Ercim says that the programme enables fellows to work with internationally recognised experts and improve their knowledge of the European research environment, while promoting cooperation between different research groups.

Emma Liere is fellowship programme manager at Ercim.

Why is this programme unusual?

Most of the time institutes have one or more positions in specific domains, and postdocs directly contact them to discuss a project. Here that's not the case: we offer researchers the opportunity to apply with just a desire to work in a particular research domain. Applicants can just say they have an idea but don't know where they can work on it. So they apply, and then we open the applications so that our hosts can find ideas they like.

Another nice thing is that there's no limitation regarding the nationality or age—it's really open. We've had applicants aged about 50 before.

If applicants want to specify a preferred institute, can they?

Yes, applicants can specify where they do and don't want to go by choosing from a list of potential hosts. For example if they've seen work done by a team in a specific institute that's in line with what they would like to do they can note that they'd like to work there.

How many fellowships are funded?

It really depends on the quality of the applicants. I try to get this information from the hosts, but most of the time they protest that they don't know whether they will find good applicants, so can't say. Normally about ten fellowships are funded each round. Ercim has no funds—it's our members who pay for the fellows—but we really try to ease the process for both fellow and host. Hosts prefer to use us than find people by themselves.

Can institutes host more than one fellow?

Yes, it's not limited, they can take all the fellows they like if they can fund them. I was informed that Norway would like to take eight fellows this year if they have the funds to pay for them, so for this call I think there will be more than ten fellows funded overall. That doesn't mean that Norway will end up with eight fellows, because that many applicants might not want to go to Norway.

What does applying involve?

Candidates find it very easy. Sometimes it's a bit frustrating because they do it in about ten minutes and don't take it very seriously. Everything is done online. There are seven pages, for personal information, institute selection, the research field, the applicants' scientific background, previous mobility experience, management experience, and so on. Applicants have to provide two papers written in English, and they have to define their research proposal in 100 words. So it's not very long. The experience sections are just five sections of 30 lines each. Applicants also have the opportunity to link to a short video presentation about themselves if they want to.

Are applicants entirely free to define their project?

The way we do it is the applicants describe their idea, and then after institutions have selected the candidates they're interested in then we ask the fellow to get in touch with the research coordinator at the host institution. Together they then define a more precise programme. So it's a kind of collaboration between the coordinator and the postdoc.

How are applications assessed?

They're assessed by the host institutions, with me acting as a mediator. In the first step, I open the database and inform the hosts that they can access the applicants' information. I have one contact in each Ercim member institution—usually a scientist. The assessors at each institution will depend on the scientific domain and that kind of thing. Some of our partners fund a project from the international department and so it's that department that makes the final decision, whereas with other partners the information is forwarded to the whole community, and who does the assessment depends on who has the money.

What's the process, exactly?

The administrative coordinator at the host will send me a list of their favourite applicants. Maybe they'll evaluate 100, but have funds for only three or four. They give me a ranked list with usually more candidates than they can fund, in case of refusal by their first priority. I receive all the lists, and sometimes there is one person selected by, say, four institutes, so I just try to organise it and make some suggestions. I try to ease things and give some advice such as giving priorities to women in case of double selection.

What else do you look out for in the case of in-demand postdocs?

There are general ideas we would like to promote. For instance, if someone is selected by one institute offering a working contract and another offering a stipend, I'll give priority to the institute offering the working contract. Institutes can disagree with my process, but that's rare because I try to be very fair—I can be convincing. If two institutes want the same person, we can make known the bursaries on offer, or ask the person where they would prefer to go. We always try to find a solution.

One of the assessment criteria on your website is "interest or added value for the consortium"—what does that mean?

That was more important in a previous incarnation of the programme, when fellows worked with two different teams for nine months each, with co-funding from the European Commission. Part of the idea of the programme is to build cooperation between different research centres and organisations by having the fellows as links. But the co-funding ended and we had to change our model. Now fellows have to spend at least one week in an Ercim institute other than their host. It's good for the hosts, because they can cooperate on their research, but it's also good for the fellows because they get to visit another Ercim partner in another country.

When do you use that criterion now, if at all?

That assessment criterion relates to the fact that sometimes the consortium has some scientific priorities, because Ercim is not limited to the fellowship programme: it also has a vision for science in Europe. So if the vision of the fellows fits the vision of the consortium, then that can give a candidate additional bonus points. But it really depends—that criterion is sometimes relevant, but not always.

Does Ercim have any priorities for the time being?

I'm not aware of any specific directions at the moment, but on our website there are PDFs of the scientific reports of our former fellows; if someone wants to go to a specific institute they can look at what research has been done there.

Does the host ever speak directly to applicants before making a decision?

They can, but it's very rare. When the fellow is told they've been selected, they get say 15 days to decide whether they're interested, and within that time I recommend they get in touch with the research coordinator to see whether their project fits with their expectations.

What advice would you give applicants?

People should just be honest about what they want to do: the programme offers a rare chance to pursue individual interests and they should make the most of that.

Can unsuccessful applicants apply again?

Yes, there's no limit on that. Successful applicants, however, can only apply for two terms. That is, if a host is very keen on a fellow, they can extend the fellowship for another 12 months, but only 12 months: we don't want to maintain the fellows for too much time in a postdoc situation.

Is there any difference from one call to the next?

No, except that I try to update the information from the hosts for each time. For instance, sometimes a partner will say they know that they have no funds for a given call, so I remove them from the selection form.

Is there anything else people should know?

We evaluated the five-year period during which we had Commission support—when, admittedly, we were able to fund more fellows—but in that time our fellows wrote 420 scientific papers. I think that's a good record.

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