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Top PI Andrzej Jajszczyk: Mobility matters

By Robin Bisson



Image: Jan Zych

The founding director of Poland's national funder has seen everything from communism to EU membership

Things have changed a lot for Polish researchers since Andrzej Jajszczyk received his doctoral degree in 1979. The lifting of the Iron Curtain at the end of the 1980s and Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 have transformed the country's research landscape, and Jajszczyk has been at the vanguard.

Now a professor of telecommunications at the AGH University of Science and Technology in Kraków, he was the founding director of the National Science Centre, Poland's national funding agency, from 2011 to 2015.

Despite the national transformation of the past 40 years, Jajszczyk is still pushing for change. "I'm trying to persuade some Polish researchers and authorities to change some bad habits," he says.

One of the issues Jajszczyk singles out is low researcher mobility, and his main advice for young researchers is to expand their horizons. "Go outside Poland for your postdoctoral study," he says. "Spend two or three years outside your institution and preferably outside Poland in a good research group."

Foreign forays

In his early years as a researcher, while Poland was still communist, travelling abroad for work posed a considerable problem due to the harsh exchange rates between currencies in eastern and western Europe. "My monthly salary as a young researcher was around \$15 a month," he recalls, adding that to attend a conference in the UK he received a grant of £50 from the British Council, which just covered his accommodation.

Nonetheless, Jajszczyk's expertise in telecommunications networking led to stints at universities in both Australia and Canada as a visiting scientist. Returning to Poland in the early 1990s after the fall of communism, he found that the country was opening up and there were an increasing number of opportunities to work with European partners.

"Even before we joined the EU we were allowed, according to some association agreements, to ask for European money," he says. "I was involved in various joint research projects funded by the EU."

In the mid-1990s, Jajszczyk became involved with Copernicus, the EU programme for developing information systems using satellite data, working with academic colleagues in Belgium, Italy and Germany. He also worked with telecommunication companies and public-private consortia involved in early internet infrastructure in Europe. "These consortia were relatively big in terms of number of participants, which allowed us to get contacts across Europe," he says.

During this time, Jajszczyk says, his western European research partners' attitudes towards eastern European researchers began to change. At first, he was invited to be involved in projects because there were incentives for including partners from eastern Europe, "but they asked us to participate in subsequent programmes because they found that we were good, we were useful, we could do decent research", he recalls.

Domestic differences

Within Poland, research funding was not always as forthcoming. "At the early stage of development of postcommunist Poland, there were some funding opportunities from the ministry but the system was not transparent," Jajszczyk says. "Money went mainly to well-established researchers. For young researchers, it was considerably more difficult."

He says the situation for young Polish researchers is now completely different. This is partly due to Poland becoming a member of the EU, which opened up many opportunities under the research Framework programmes, including international mobility schemes such as the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions fellowships.

But he says the main difference for young researchers is the existence of modern funding agencies in Poland. "They complain because salaries at universities are not as high as in western Europe," he says ruefully, but he points out that grant success rates at Polish funding agencies are 25 to 30 per cent.

Founding a national funder

Jajszczyk was instrumental in creating Poland's funding system. Having been involved in the push to create a national research funding agency, he then won the job as its founding director. Creating the National Science Centre from scratch was a major challenge, he says, and in order to break with the past he was very careful to "show society and the research community that we were using public money wisely".

This included setting rules for responsible research conduct and "presenting very detailed reports about activities, about how money was divided, who the beneficiary was and so on". He was particularly keen to shield the fledgling funder from too much political influence: "Of course, I had to talk to the ministers and push them for money, but generally there was no politics inside the agency, and it's stayed that way, I think."

The European Research Council, where Jajszczyk is a member of the governing Scientific Council, was his major inspiration when setting up the National Science Centre. "We took the division into 25 panels from the ERC, so the ERC was definitely a good example to us."

Jajszczyk was careful to instil in his young staff a sense of social responsibility and accountability. "We had some more experienced researchers like panel coordinators with PhDs, but these were also usually relatively young researchers," he says. "When I left the National Science Centre after four years of my term, I was pretty sure that the agency would operate quite well because of the people and their attitude."

Breaking down barriers

Despite Poland's membership of the EU, Jajszczyk says he has "mixed feelings" about how well the Polish research community has integrated in Europe, pointing out that there are a "discouraging" number of grants awarded to researchers working in Poland.

"Some people claim that there is such good financing in the National Science Centre that people don't apply to the ERC, but it would be too easy to explain it like that," he says.

Since returning to his research role, he has been involved in consulting the minister for research and higher education on legislation to change the shape of Polish universities, which he says are "too hierarchical" and prevent young researchers from progressing in their careers.

"I think that we can expect improvements because of that bill," he says. "We will see the results in a year or two."