

Dr Rado Faletič

Executive Director*, Forum for European-Australian Science and Technology cooperation

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While there is clearly much to be gained from bilateral and multilateral research collaboration, too often these partnerships are inhibited by difficulties in funding and other infrastructural issues. In the first of an enlightening two-part discussion with *International Innovation*, **Dr Rado Faletič** explains how FEAST has facilitated European-Australian collaboration

*At the time of publication the FEAST initiative is between funding cycles.
Dr Faletič is currently Director of Projects and Communications at Montroix Pty Ltd.

Firstly, could you provide a summary of the Forum for European-Australian Science and Technology cooperation (FEAST)? What is its background?

FEAST is a quasi-diplomatic unit that was initially established to highlight, promote and facilitate research collaborations between Europe and Australia. This role has since expanded to support the formal activities between the European Commission and the Australian Government.

A lot of our day-to-day work has revolved around directly helping Australian and European researchers find suitable funding sources to support their collaborative activities. Most of the queries are in relation to the EU's 7th Framework Programme (FP7). Australians can fully participate in this programme, but getting financial support for their involvement is not a straightforward process.

The idea for such a unit was first conceptualised in the year 2000, by the scientific attaché at the Embassy of France in Canberra, Alain Moulet. He initially proposed a one-stop-shop for information regarding funding opportunities to support research collaborations between France and Australia. The concept proved appealing to a broader constituency, and after a series of events to explore the idea, the FEAST unit was established in 2002 with funding from the European Commission and the Australian Government.

Due to the success of FEAST, the Commission expanded the concept to a number of other countries that have formal science and technology agreements with the European Union, now known as BILAT projects (see full list at <http://ec.europa.eu/research/iscp/index.cfm?pg=bilat>).

Why were you attracted to working for FEAST? Have research collaborations played a significant role in your own scientific career?

I initially applied for the role of FEAST Webmaster in 2005, shortly after the award of my PhD (in rocket science). Whilst completing my PhD I held a number of IT positions, including in web development. The role of FEAST Webmaster caught my attention as it brought together my interests in research and web development.

I must admit that during my research years I did not engage in any major collaborative activities. It wasn't until I started working at FEAST that I began collaborating in earnest. A unit such as FEAST cannot achieve a significant impact unless its staff engage with a broad and diverse range of actors across the research sector. It was primarily the development of these networks that eventually allowed me to assume the role of Executive Director of the organisation.

How would you define FEAST's aims and objectives? What strategies have you employed to achieve these?

The main aim of FEAST has always been to increase the level and quality of research collaborations between Europe and Australia. We have undertaken a range of activities to help achieve this outcome, the most significant of which has been to increase the flow of information between Europe and Australia.

Our depth of knowledge in some of the large research funding programmes has allowed us to deliver this information in such a way that it is relevant to a local research audience. Similarly, as we have heard about researchers successfully utilising these programmes in order to pursue international collaborations, we have showcased those stories to provide 'how-to' case studies. A lot of our time has been spent one-on-one with researchers and organisations, helping them understand foreign programmes, and how to best engage with them in order to pursue desired research outcomes.

To support our mission, we developed a comprehensive website, the largest of its kind. It is getting a rather phenomenal number of visits, currently tracking around 40,000 unique visits each and every month. The lion's share of these visits are to the RSS feeds on funding opportunities and on relevant news articles. It also gets a lot of visits as a result of Google searches, as many of the web pages appear quite high in the Google page rankings.

Although it is widely recognised that bilateral and multilateral research collaborations can be very valuable, many Australian and European researchers still find it difficult to embark on joint projects. What would you define as the major obstacles that inhibit European-Australian cooperation? How might these be overcome?

It will be no surprise to your readers to learn that funding is still the number one obstacle that inhibits international collaboration. There have been many reports and advocates over the years that have recommended an increase in the amount of dedicated funding for international collaboration activities. The reason for this is that most domestic funding sources can be difficult to mobilise for supporting international activities. To try and counter this impediment, in recent years funding agencies such as the Australian Research Council have begun to implement programme policies that make it more permissive to use such domestic sources for and with international partners.

All other impediments, on the whole, are relatively minor compared with this issue. However, we have also found that bureaucratic matters often get in the way, particularly in the case of collaborating with the EU's funding programmes. We understand why the EU's rules and regulations are somewhat complex; they have got to be able to encompass all of the national considerations from all of the European countries. But for a researcher from Australia, they often get frustrated with the comparatively high degree of bureaucracy involved in the EU programmes, and this is another area where we have helped by 'translating' the language of the EU into something more familiar.

Which factors do you believe are intrinsic to success within international research partnerships?

The most important factor, without a doubt, is trust. When there is a good level of trust between individuals, formal partnerships become merely a mechanism to support already strong relationships. But it is much more than simply being able to count on your partners. Trust is developed over many years of fruitful collaboration. This history delivers many benefits, including the ability to understand foreign research systems and modalities, as well as cultural issues. Without knowledge of

these issues, formal partnerships will be fraught with challenges relating to a lack of understanding between cultures, and a failure to adequately adapt local systems (financial, reporting, etc.) to suit the formal partnership arrangements.

It comes as no surprise that the nations with the strongest international reputations for quality research (and research partnerships) are the same nations that have deliberately supported the long-term international engagement of their researchers.

To what extent do you believe that the EU and Australia share a similar agenda in terms of science and technology innovation?

There are a lot of cultural factors in common between the EU and Australia, not least of which is that the majority of Australians can trace their ancestry back to Europe. This is particularly true amongst researchers, who tend to be somewhat more mobile than the broader community. So, unsurprisingly, research agendas across Australia have a lot in common with what is happening across Europe. For example, research initiatives focused on ageing societies, climate change, ICT, etc., are examples of areas where Europe and Australia share a lot of common interest.

However, Australia's proximity to the rapidly growing economies in Asia has meant that a lot of what is happening in Australia is now very clearly focused on this region. For example, until recently, the Australian Government operated a funding programme that was aimed at supporting strategic research engagements with key international partners right across the world. It was this initiative that the Australian Government used to provide its financial support for FEAST. Subsequent to the conclusion of this programme, the remaining significant dedicated funding support for international activities is with China and India.

This is not to say that Australia is no longer interested in collaborating with Europe; far from it. In fact, the level of formal and informal collaborations with Europe continues to grow, year after year, and the Government is also expanding its role in terms of helping these collaborations grow.

Has FEAST partnered with any other agencies or organisations? How have such partnerships been beneficial to your work?

There are many organisations that we have partnered with over the years. Whenever we run an event (eg. seminars about how to engage with European funding programmes), we endeavour to allow the local host to assume ownership of it. This greatly enhanced our own capability to attract an engaged audience, as the host is always in the best position to know who amongst their staff would be most interested in, and stand to gain the most benefit from, the information that we deliver.

On this point, in recent years we partnered with the Australasian Research Management Society (ARMS). This association represents research managers in almost every research institution across Australasia

(including public agencies, universities and private research institutions). This has enabled FEAST to more directly and effectively communicate with local people who need to know the details of the opportunities that we highlight. They, in turn, are able to disseminate this knowledge to the researchers that they engage with on a day-to-day basis.

It has had additional benefits that we did not envisage from the beginning. For example, this partnership greatly increased FEAST's visibility amongst the ARMS constituency, which resulted in a significant increase in detailed enquiries from researchers, who have been directed to us by their local ARMS members.

Of course, we have continued to work closely with groups such as the various learned academies in Australia and in Europe, diplomatic missions, government bodies, universities, etc.

In terms of knowledge exchange, how can you help to stimulate innovation in other parts of the world in the coming years?

Until recently, each of the strategies comparable to FEAST have operated in relative isolation from each other. This led to a lot of duplication of efforts in different parts of the world. But in the past several months, there has been an increasing level of discussion, staff exchange and meetings amongst this group of projects. This will help to ensure that the great insights and innovations of each project are leveraged across the world.

In many ways, FEAST in Australia was the first of these projects, and as such the FEAST staff have a wealth of experience to share with other initiatives around the world. Moreover, as the research world becomes more competitive, and funds more difficult to obtain, it is prudent for us to also seek out the experiences and innovations of others, to ensure that our own endeavours remain relevant in the global research landscape.

In the future, we see great scope for deeper links between European and Australian research. Given the long history of trust and mutual understanding between the two regions, we expect that there will be advances made in providing greater transparency for integrating individual research efforts. For example, national funding programmes will acknowledge the peer-review and reporting methodologies of external programmes, and will provide greater flexibility with regards to incorporating international participants on project grants.



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