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Collaboration is CRITICAL

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

In the concluding part of our extended conversation with FEAST, **Rado Faletič** extols the virtues of international collaboration and knowledge exchange to foster meaningful growth in science and technology throughout the world

Is 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 enhances 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 have 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 us 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.

You recently carried out the FEAST Extension, Enhancement and Demonstration (FEED) project. Could you offer an overview of this project?

FEED has been the third iteration of the FEAST initiative. It built upon the previous successful projects (FEAST and FEAST phase II), and the core competencies of the FEAST team.

The main elements of the project have been to provide an evidence base to the following questions:

- Why collaborate? Clarifying the nature and extent of the likely benefits to be obtained relative to the costs. This helps to stimulate a vibrant collaborative community willing and able to collaborate because they are clear about the advantages and the associated costs and risks
- What to collaborate in? The world faces major global challenges and emerging new opportunities both of which require a scale and scope of research activities that are beyond the resources of most individual nations. Better information on the distinctive research capabilities will facilitate efficient and effective international cooperation in these important areas

- How to collaborate? Actually conducting effective collaboration usually involves choices within a sequence of events. There are also important issues to consider when deciding upon collaboration with researchers in different nations. Assisting researchers to make better decisions by collating and sharing information on strategies and tactics helps to maximise the quantity and quality of research collaboration
- Who should collaborate? The international mobility of researchers is linked to collaborative behaviour. Different career stages involve different opportunities and constraints regarding mobility and collaboration. Consequently, it is important to tailor advice on why to collaborate, what to collaborate in and how to collaborate to the distinctive concerns found at different stages in a research career

What impact has the FEED strategy had? Have there been any noteworthy achievements?

There have been a number of initiatives that we have undertaken as part of the FEED project that we are particularly proud of. These are:

- Bibliometric studies. Early in the project the FEAST team was integrated into a group with a strong competency in bibliometric studies. It was decided to shift the focus of the FEED project away from the anecdotal methods of surveys and workshops, to the more robust quantitative analysis offered by bibliometrics. FEED activities focused on developing methodologies for probing bibliometric data and analysing the results, as they pertain to international collaborations between Australia and Europe (in addition to Australia's other key research partners, particularly the US and China). Using bibliometrics also removed the restriction of having to prioritise analysis to a limited number of research fields, as would have been the case with surveys and workshops
- Story-driven surveys. We have always had a strong sense of the issues and motivations for research collaboration between Australia and Europe. However, until the FEED project there was little empirical data to support this understanding. The primary motivation for conducting a detailed survey was to draw on the experiences (positive and negative) of a large number of Australian researchers engaged in the EU's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) in order to develop a comprehensive and sound set of strategic recommendations that could be used to optimise future collaborations. Rather than a simple questionnaire, the FEED project developed the notion of a 'guided interview'. A detailed set of questions was prepared, including a number of quantitative elements, that formed a basis for discussion. Interviewers, however, allowed the participants to tell their own story, in their own words, of the factors that they felt were important and significant to the collaboration. Responses were then codified, where appropriate, in order to be able to aggregate some statistics across the large number of interviews. Allowing researchers to tell their own story ensured that the issues that they felt were important were highlighted, as opposed to many other surveys where the questions, by definition, force participants to provide answers to predefined notions of important issues. The results of the process were remarkable. Whilst a number of previously understood issues were confirmed, a great deal of new information was gathered which has dramatically reshaped the way we deliver information, and certainly allowed us to better target the right support to the people who need it
- Discussion papers and opinion editorials. FEAST has traditionally circulated information about its activities and findings via newsletters and reports. However, as it became apparent that more people amongst university management and government policy were taking an interest in the work of FEAST, it became important to disseminate via other target mediums. In particular, this has included discussion papers and opinion editorials (OpEds). The discussion papers, of which there are seven at the present time, were all developed based upon the input and needs of the relevant actors in government and funding

agencies. The topics of these papers varied, but generally focused on communicating the results of other FEED activities (bibliometrics, symposia, surveys). These papers have received broad circulation, and a number of them have been often cited by organisations working in the international collaboration field (eg. Chief Scientist of Australia, Australian Academy of Science, The British Council, etc.)

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

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 has 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.

What is the next phase for FEAST, and for yourself? Where would you like to see European-Australian research collaboration in coming years?

Later in 2012, the next phase of the FEAST initiative will begin. A far larger and broader project has been developed, involving a number of partners in Europe and in Australia. This new project, called Connecting Australian-European Science and Innovation Excellence (CAESIE), will be much more closely integrated with the bilateral discussions between the Australian Government and the European Commission; it will deliver new initiatives to support research and innovation collaboration, and will ramp up FEAST's traditional activities to a new level of visibility and engagement.

As for myself, I have started a business with some close colleagues. Via this business, Montroix Pty Ltd, we aim to maintain our involvement in a range of international collaboration projects (specifically, the International Cooperation projects from the European Commission), as we have many years of experience and expertise in this area that will be of great benefit to ongoing and future projects. More broadly, we will be supporting universities and governments in relation to international collaboration matters.

In the future, we see great scope for deeper links between European and Australian research. In particular, 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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