



## Assessment Mid-Term Review by REA, 6- 8 November 2013 Heidelberg, Germany

Sent by ARFI Audrey (REA) <[Audrey.ARFI@ec.europa.eu](mailto:Audrey.ARFI@ec.europa.eu)>. All responses have to be sent to this email address.  
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Dear Matthijs and Joost,  
Again thank you very much for the very good MTR meeting that you have organised.  
I received a short feedback from Felix that I have included in my report.  
Please see my feedback below. ...  
...  
Best wishes  
Audrey

### Overall Assessment:

The principal aim of *Sphingonet* is to launch an interdisciplinary research & training program to dissect and visualize cellular mechanisms of sphingolipid homeostasis and to gain global views of the sphingolipid signaling network. *Sphingonet* unites leading experts to uncover the molecular architecture & regulatory potential of the sphingolipid signaling network and to expand opportunities for its therapeutic use. The network is composed of 9 academic partners, 1 private partner and 2 associated partners. An attractive platform to train young researchers has been designed, including not only an expertise in sphingolipids biology, but also in systems biology, chemical biology, synthetic chemistry, proteo/lipidomics, drug targets and development.

During the report period, 10 ESRs and 2 ERs have been recruited, based on their scientific excellence. More than 152 applications have been received and 3 rounds of selection were organised to select the best qualified candidates. All ESRs are enrolled in PhD programmes and have access to their local training events, in addition to the SPHINGONET training programme. The recruitment process has been very efficient and no major delay occurred. All ESR/ER have a supervisor from the host institution and a second supervisor from another network partner, allowing an adequate planning of secondments and the design of an optimal career development plan.

The project has fully achieved its objectives and technical goals for the period. Excellent progress was made in all aspects and for all proposed goals. Major Milestones, deliverables and tasks were achieved for all work packages. Several challenges have been identified in the research programme: the tools in WP1 and WP5 need to be timely developed, the projects or tool development are relatively isolated and it is important to integrate them properly, there are short timelines for ER projects, the know-how of associated partners should be optimally used. All these challenges have been particularly well managed during the first period, although two major amendment procedures.

All fellows have well defined research projects. Research results have been presented by all fellows at scientific meetings and several manuscripts are in preparation or already submitted. Supervisory board is active in overseeing the research and training of the fellows and actively engages in strengthening the network collaboration. There is a meaningful cooperation between partners, due in part to long-lasting collaborations, and which promotes numerous interactions between fellows.

In terms of training, the project was particularly successful in implementing research training to the fellows. So far, several Advanced Training Courses and Complementary trainings, summer schools, general courses took place, as well as training workshops language courses and local training. The secondment plan has been slightly shifted to the second period of the project. One secondment already took place; the 11 others are planned and are subject to modification according to the research needs (evolving projects) and the fellows' wishes. Training objectives for this period have been met, from the recruitment of all fellows, to the individual and network training meetings, individual career development plans and individual research projects. It is interesting to note that all fellows received an optimal support from the second supervisor. All fellows are members of the Young Researcher Council (YRC), which organises its own satellite meetings to discuss any subject of interest to its members, involving external experts, and shares training experiences with the network's General Assembly. The YRC is also involved in dissemination and outreach activities. This YRC should be considered as best practice in ITNs.

Both the research and the training of all fellows are progressing according to the planned objectives. The overall work of the project is following the planned progress outlined in the Annex I. The project has succeeded in establishing an active, vibrant, very coordinated, interactive and productive research network with an excellent training programme for early-stage and experienced researchers in sphingolipids homeostasis. As judged by the presentations of the coordinator and the fellows during the Mid-Term review meeting, the S&T objectives have been met. There is a very good synergy between all S&T work packages. *Sphingonet* is a perfect example of a multidisciplinary network (biochemists, chemists and biologists) achieving a very well integrated project. Each work package has been making satisfactory progress as planned in the Annex I. Very good scientific progress has been made by each team and this has been well detailed in the report. Any difficulties (technical or experimental) has been overcome, discussed within the network and solved.

The objectives for the coming periods are still relevant and achievable within the time and resources available to the project. The secondments will be a dominant activity in the next period, in order to enlarge fellows' experience, get exposure to another sector (private or academic) and to another discipline. Each fellow has been also asked to identify suitable secondment possibilities based on the scientific expertise and input that each partner could bring to the fellows' individual research projects. It is not expected that there will be problems in finishing the research and training activities within the time limits of the project.

The management of the project is very well structured and all the procedures are in place. The management team met regularly during the reporting period, organised the kick-off meeting, and 2 other meetings (combined with workshop meetings). Several external scientific advisers (leaders in their research field) have also been appointed and participate in meetings of the network. They give valuable input to the network, in particular for potential exploitation of results and further scientific developments.

The consortium is extremely well integrated. From a scientific perspective, the partners possess complementary and synergistic competencies and facilities, and have demonstrated a very good return on investment through the research output produced by the project to date. The integration of the partners is also evidenced by the smooth running of the internal procedures, the network-wide events... The opportunities for cross-sectoral collaboration between the academic and industrial partners are excellent. The companies involved add tremendous value to the project and offer excellent research training opportunities to the fellows.

During the mid-term review meeting, all fellows demonstrated very good knowledge of the research project. They were able to make clear and well-structured presentations. They all had very good presentation skills. It is important to note that all ESRs were very satisfied of their current experience, almost all aware of Marie Curie rules and their rights. The problem of tuition fees (UK) has been discussed. Part of the category 3 could be taken to cover partially the fees but best practices of several institutions in UK showed the possibility to negotiate reduced tuition fees with the institution administration, by highlighting the positive impact of



Marie Curie Grants/EU funds on the institution and the research in Europe. UK citizens' tuition rate could be applied to all Marie Curie fellows. This possibility should be discussed. Language issues have been reported mainly related to the fellows' contract of employment. A translation could be given if requested by the fellows (Euraxess Portal might help for this issues). The fellows work very closely and developed a very nice team and network spirit. It was also striking how well they all interact and communicate in spite of their totally different backgrounds. The fellows are well integrated at the level of the research team, institution and the network team and generally received good support from their host and supervisors. They were very satisfied by their supervision and had a very positive feedback on their Marie Curie experience.

The collaboration between beneficiaries is excellent. This was evident during the Mid-Term review meeting, during which there was very good relationships among the fellows and PIs.

In terms of dissemination, all fellows have already participated in European and / or international conferences and workshops (several contributions at international conferences and seminars reported). An impressive number of publications has been reported, of which the majority is submitted or published in prestigious peer-reviewed journals. Already 8 joint publications have been reported, among which one has been considered as a "hot paper" by the journal editors. Few publications with authors from collaborating groups have been published, and some very interesting results are expected, specifically for the regulation of sphingolipid homeostasis and sphingolipid function that will likely result from the second period of the project. Here the strong chemical biology available will be of specific help. Significant outreach activities have been organised, such as schools visits (Davidson Institute). During a Wikimedia workshop, the fellows created and/or extended 12 entries in Wikipedia to spread didactic information generated by the network. More outreach activities are expected in the second part of the project, and should involve all the fellows. The website is active, up-to-date and useful. It acknowledges EU and MCA funding.

#### Conclusion, follow-up and impact:

As highlighted by the external experts, who attended the mid-term review meeting, there are enough very good groups within the network with a potential to provide novel insight into the fascinating function of sphingolipids that warrant the money spent on this grant. More emphasis should also be put on technical skills, and the fellows should better enjoy their current experience, not focusing too early on future positions, but test, discuss new ideas and develop their creativity...

In conclusion this project is running very well with no major modification in the work plan, and with many potential outcomes. The project already provided evidence that it will produce significant scientific and commercial impact. ESRs are incredibly well aware of how valorising their research results. This project could be considered as a success story, in terms of:

- long-lasting collaborations
- very high scientific quality of the research and the research partners
- impact of research results on the society within the medical, and consumers industry (good innovation potential)
- transfer of knowledge between academic and private partners (substantial participation of private sector)
- Good gender balance

The coordinator and the other partners were happy about this MTR meeting which was a useful opportunity to ask questions, to clarify some Marie Curie rules, and to give their feedback to the Project Officer. Many of them complained about the complex rules of Marie Curie programme and that much more flexibility should be given to the scientists. Other funding Marie Curie Actions opportunities were discussed, in particular the new Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions under Horizon 2020 (brief introduction). All partners complained about the removal of ERs within ITN scheme which might drastically impair the private sector's participation in the programme. MTR guidelines should also focus more on science.

#### Issues for follow up

- The problem of tuition fees (UK) has been discussed. Part of the category 3 could be taken to cover partially the fees but best practices of several institutions in UK showed the possibility to negotiate reduced tuition fees with the institution administration, by highlighting the positive impact of Marie Curie Grants/EU funds on the institution and the research in Europe. UK citizens' tuition rate could be applied to all Marie Curie fellows. This possibility should be discussed.

- More outreach activities are expected in the second part of the project, and should involve all the fellows.

- Ethics Issues: Ethics documents have been already received for partner 6 (UOXF). If an update is needed, a copy of the new documents should be sent to the project officer. This will be double checked at the periodic report and could block the interim payment in case a document is missing.

- Periodic report will be due in February 2014.