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EXTERNAL FUNDS, A NEW UNIT FOR SUPPORTING INFN INITIATIVES IS BORN

*Interview with Amedeo Staiano,
head of the External Funds Division*

With the kick-off meeting hosted at the Frascati National Laboratories on 18 January, the new External Funds Division (DFE) was presented to the INFN community. The event, which was attended by both the administrative and scientific representatives of the Institute, was an opportunity to present the structure and services DFE offers to the community: we talked about it with the head of the DFE, Amedeo Staiano.

In which context and why does the INFN External Funds Division arise?

The External Funds Division (DFE) represents INFN's evolution towards an ever-increasing focus on European and other funding calls, and the consequent need to effectively organise the Institute's initiatives. This evolution began with the establishment of the Commission for Relations with the European Union in 2003, which was committed to completing the sixth framework programme (FP) of the European Commission (EC) and a large part of the seventh, and in 2012 it subsequently evolved into the External Funds Service, which concluded the seventh FP and addressed two thirds of the new Horizon2020 FP. The DFE, which we presented to the INFN community in the kick-off meeting a few days ago, was created on the proposal of the Executive Board and of the Director General, with the aim of continuing and increasing INFN initiatives and their impact on European framework programme calls, international calls - such as calls from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI) or non-European funding programmes -, national and regional structural and ministerial calls, and other forms of private or public research funding.

What is the mission of the External Funds Division?

The DFE is mainly engaged in promoting support actions for researchers in submitting projects to the different types of calls, and for the financial officers located throughout the country in the National

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Laboratories and in the Divisions, both in project management and reporting as well as in 1st and 2nd level audits. Design and project administrative management support constitute the two organisational pillars of the DFE, and they represent the two essential activities for effectively raising research funds from external sources. Moreover, in design support, besides drafting, there is another important front of activity: monitoring the calls defined in the new FPs of the European Commission (Horizon Europe that will start in 2021), and of the national and regional calls coming from partnership agreements, as well as their coordination with the scientific and technological research of the Institute, together with an important preventive activity during call negotiation.

How is the External Funds Division structured and organised?

We have proposed the organisation of the DFE following three guidelines. Firstly, continuity of action of the service compared to that done previously, thanks to the commitment of the personnel trained in the former External Funds Service, acquiring over the years the required skills. Secondly, the connection with the sites distributed throughout the country: unlike many departments and offices of Central Administration (CA), it includes personnel belonging to all the structures and operates as a network, in synergy and in close contact with the peripheral units. Thirdly, a clear identification of the roles, skills and perimeters of activity of the units that constitute the DFE. In some Divisions and in all National Laboratories there are local external funds services and it is essential to discuss and collaborate with them, ensuring the necessary support at the central level. The presence of representatives of some of these local services in the DFE is crucial in creating these relationships, as well as for the natural sharing of the many skills acquired at the local level.

More specifically, the DFE structure envisages a cross-sectional service, the Rules, Tools and Training Service, headed by Sabina Pellizzoni, who has the task of formalising common rules and good practices and ensuring their dissemination, building and managing the necessary IT procedures. In parallel, it deals with the training of the personnel of the DFE and of the peripheral structures that deals with external funds. Then, as already mentioned, the DFE has two sub-units: Project Management and Design. Project management and reporting, which is managed by the Project Management service, headed by Sabrina Argentati, coordinates the reporting of all projects related to external funds assigned to the Institute, defining the procedures, providing support to proponents in the pre-assignment and post-assignment of the call, and guaranteeing communication, in particular with Central Administration. This service is divided into two offices, according to the type of project: the International Project Management Office, headed by Simona Petronici, and the National and Regional Project Management Office, headed by Danila Bortot, who liaise directly to the network of financial officers distributed throughout the country.

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The second sub-unit, Design, is divided into two services: International Call Design, headed by Alessia D'Orazio, and National and Regional Call Design, headed by Franca Masciulli. These services are separate because, unlike university departments that operate on a regional basis, the INFN operates throughout the country, and the National and Regional Call Design service must necessarily be active not only at the central level with Ministries, but also with the regional institutions through local structures and departments. The International Call Design service coordinates two offices that are separated based on the call types of the European framework programmes: the Research of Excellence Office, headed by Veronica Valsecchi, takes care of the design and support of individual bottom-up and researcher mobility programmes (ERC, FET, MSCA, etc.). While the Collaborative Research Office, headed by D'Orazio, follows the design and support of collaborative research programmes, thematic networks, research infrastructure networks and monitoring of the call negotiation phase, also at the INFN office in Brussels. Particular attention is dedicated, across the board, to communication and dissemination services that Manuela Schisani oversees.

In carrying out your work, with whom will you find yourself working more closely?

Due to its purpose and its operational cross-sectionality, the DFE will closely collaborate with many INFN services and structures: from the management to many CA departments, from structure administrations to the National Commissions and other Committees, such as the Committee for the Coordination of Scientific Computing, the Computing and Networks Commission, the National Technology Transfer Commission, which has particular relevance and with which skills and commitments are shared, the Committee for the Coordination of the “Third Mission” and the Communications Office. But we will also collaborate extensively with structures outside the INFN, such as the European Commission, the Ministries, mainly the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the Regions and, more generally, with other public research organisations, with private bodies and with the business world.

Which are the main challenges that you will have to face and your primary objectives?

The INFN has decided to invest in this initiative, also by introducing new personnel in order to strengthen and extend the scope of activity of the service. The structure, with a new division of roles, has not had a settling in and running in period because we had to immediately start the operational phase. This was perhaps the first challenge we had to face: the first 2nd level audit for three MSCA-RISE projects came less than two months after the establishment of the DFE.

The priorities of the interventions were defined during our weekly meetings, and working groups were

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trained to address and propose solutions to the most urgent issues. The Project Management priorities include: strengthening of administrative procedures with an important investment in the computerisation of certain management processes, definition of project reporting guidelines, definition of the role of the financial officers and production of common authorisation workflows, restructuring of the portal and project database updating and interfacing. On the Design side: strengthening of the intervention in collaborative research with the injection of new personnel, preparation for the challenge of Horizon Europe, consolidation of the Science Excellence programmes, core business of INFN activity, use of new tools available to researchers for the identification of new types of calls, support in the construction of careers for young people - important today that we have finally restarted a substantial recruitment campaign - and an investment of attention and resources in national and regional projects where INFN has a significant geographical heterogeneity of results, partly due to the nature of the PON calls, but also partly to the different penetration capacity of the Institute in the local realities.

On the other hand, the INFN Ordinary Fund (FOE) has been declining steadily over the last two decades, while revenues with destination restrictions, of which the External Funds represent the largest part, are growing, to the point that today, funds with destination restrictions represent approximately 50% of the FOE fund. The objective of the DFE is therefore to consolidate these revenues, trying as much as possible to facilitate raising financial resources, and to combine the scientific mission of the institute with the varied offer of the national and international research and innovation programmes. ■