International Innovation speaks with Dr Olaf Heilmayer, Coordinator of the BILAT USA 2.0 project and Head of the Unit for Multilateral Cooperation at the German Aerospace Center, about the ways in which the initiative is working to unite researchers on both sides of the Atlantic at the advent of Horizon 2020

To begin, could you outline the mission of BILAT USA 2.0?

BILAT USA 2.0 is an EU project funded under the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7). Its objective is to facilitate and enhance science, technology and innovation (STI) partnerships between the EU and US. This objective will be achieved in a number of ways, such as organising different thematic workshops bringing researchers and innovators together, and conducting mutual awareness-raising activities in both the EU and US on research and innovation opportunities.

BILAT USA 2.0 leads on from the BILAT USA and Link2US projects; to what extent does BILAT USA 2.0 differ from its predecessors?

BILAT USA 2.0 is the successor project of BILAT USA and Link2US. These initiatives laid very important groundwork for the project today. The mission of the current initiative continues their work towards the optimisation of framework conditions for EU-US research cooperation and the analyses of the current state of collaboration.

That said, one important and novel feature of BILAT USA 2.0 is the deeper consideration of the innovation aspect, meaning that we look not only at researchers but also at the needs of innovators. In this way, our project reflects changes to the broader European research and innovation landscape. If you look at Horizon 2020, it is now not only a research framework programme but one that officially integrates the whole innovation dimension.

How were the partners for the BILAT USA 2.0 consortium selected, and how did the German Aerospace Center (DLR) come to be project coordinator?

The project consortium is composed of public project management agencies, research funding agencies, university associations and universities, and innovation actors. European projects are usually designed to have a regional and geographical balance, with partners from several EU countries as well as those from a ‘target country’ – which in this case is the US. Having similar and complementary goals, BILAT USA 2.0
supports the US taskforce within the Strategic Forum for International S&T Cooperation (SFIC – see p90). Therefore, we asked members of this taskforce to join the project, eg. as Advisory Board Members.

DLR was selected as the project coordinator partly because Germany is the lead Member State within the US-SFIC taskforce and partly because cooperation with the US is of utmost importance to Germany. Furthermore, the project management agency of DLR has extensive experience working in the public sector for Ministries (such as the German Ministry for Education and Research) and the Directorate General for Research and Innovation of the EC. In fact, the International Bureau has been involved in approximately 40 international cooperation projects funded by the EC under the Capacities programme. As a project coordinator for BILAT USA 2.0, our main responsibility is the general management of the project, including the support of the policy dialogue as well as a steady communication with the EC, the Advisory Board and all project partners.

What is the role of the project’s Advisory Board?

Several EU projects make use of an advisory board composed of different experts with various backgrounds, such as representatives from ministries or funding agencies, scientists and innovation actors. In our case, the Advisory Board’s role is to give strategic policy advice and guidance to the project, provide targeted expert advice, and support us in disseminating information to relevant networks and institutions. In addition to the Advisory Board, we also have an external review panel that ensures quality of project deliverables, which works in addition to our internal quality management.

Could you outline some of the major challenges associated with transatlantic research cooperation, and highlight how BILAT USA 2.0 is working to combat them?

Many cooperation challenges stem from intercultural differences and different ways of communication. One major problem is different terminology. The European Framework Programme has a different ‘wording’ compared to that of, for example, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the US. This can become complicated when EU and US researchers intend to work jointly on a research project. This is further exacerbated by the fact that, in the US, all of the different funders have their own individual terminologies. However, representatives from the EC and US are well aware of this problem and are currently working together with BILAT USA 2.0 on the first draft of a guide that will explain the different meanings of the terminologies in the various funding programmes. This should facilitate cooperation, and be a very practical guide for researchers and administrators.

Furthermore, an online survey conducted by the first BILAT USA project demonstrated that one of the biggest challenges for EU-US research cooperation is signing an EU grant agreement. Almost 40 per cent of all US researchers were not ready to sign the final contract, although their project was evaluated positively. Reasons behind this are manifold, but are mainly based on a lack of knowledge regarding legal and administrative aspects and requirements in the different programmes. To increase knowledge of EU administrative requirements in the US, we are working closely together with our partner, the National Council on University Research Administrators (NCURA), which is the largest association of research managers and administrators in the US. With their help, we will be able to reach all major universities in the US and increase their knowledge of legal backgrounds regarding grant agreements etc.

In March 2013, the EU-US Joint STI Committee identified four research areas as thematic priorities for transatlantic cooperation; could you elaborate on what these are, and provide an insight into the ways in which BILAT USA 2.0 is supporting them?

In the meeting of the high level representatives from the EU and US, four thematic areas – Marine and Arctic Research; Health; Nanosciences, Nanotechnologies, Materials and new Production Technologies (NMP); and Transport – were determined as priority areas for cooperation, meaning that an EU-US collaboration in these fields will bring both sides an added value. Both the US and EU have many excellent researchers working in these areas, and a joint effort will create great synergies and save money, not to mention solve large-scale societal challenges that cannot be overcome by one country or region alone.

Since we are working very closely with the EC, our mission is therefore to enhance EU-US cooperation in these four thematic priority fields. We are organising two thematic workshops in each field and inviting EU and US researchers from these areas in order to stimulate cooperation in this field. Furthermore, since Horizon 2020 is the largest research and innovation programme worldwide generally open to the participation of researchers coming from other countries, one of our goals is to raise awareness of open calls and opportunities for US researchers within Horizon 2020 (eg. through information days and webinars). Vice versa, possibilities for EU researchers in US programmes will be analysed and promoted in Europe.

Over the course of its first year, what has BILAT USA 2.0 achieved?

BILAT USA 2.0 has organised several events for researchers and research administrators, including the first NMP thematic workshop for EU and US nanoscientists and materials researchers. By bringing researchers of one specific area from both sides of the Atlantic together for discussions, we intend to increase the number of international research cooperation projects. Further, we have organised targeted events for research managers and multipliers within the US (eg. in parallel to the Annual Meeting of NCURA), with the aim of explaining legal and financial specificities within Horizon 2020 whilst presenting an overview of programmes and open calls.

In what ways is BILAT USA 2.0 effectively disseminating and communicating with its international stakeholders?

We utilise the wide-reaching networks of our EU and US project partners. Our target groups range from policy makers and funding agencies to researchers and innovators, so it is important that we reach them via different networks.

Additionally, we envision our website (www.EuUsScienceTechnology.eu) as a potentially unique gateway – a ‘one-stop shop’ for researchers and stakeholders on both sides of the Atlantic – providing targeted and specific information related to research and innovation cooperation.
THEMATIC PRIORITY AREAS

Marine and Arctic Research

Health

Transport

Nanosciences, Nanotechnologies, Materials and new Production Technologies

BILAT USA 2.0

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