Enabling Canadian and European researchers to collaborate under the EU Seventh Framework Programme, ERA-Can paves the way to projects and networks on an international level. Director, Garth Williams offers an insight into its work.
What are the principal goals of The European Research Area and Canada (ERA-Can)?

Our main goal is to make it easier for Canadian and European researchers to work together, to share their knowledge and resources and, ultimately, to raise the quality of research addressing some of the greatest challenges on both sides of the Atlantic. We do this by promoting opportunities for Canadians to work with their European colleagues in EU Framework Programme projects and by improving the quality of information and advice available to them about the Framework Programme.

In what ways is the initiative improving the quality of information and assistance available to Canadian scientists with regard to the Seventh European Framework Programme (FP7)?

The most important step we have taken has been to focus on identifying the best opportunities for Canadian researchers to participate in FP7, and then explaining those opportunities in ways that are directly relevant to Canadians. As FP7 is a European programme, it almost needs to be ‘translated’ for Canadians – with different features highlighted and detailed than in Europe. It also helps to concurrently explain how Canadians can support their participation and show some of the exciting work researchers are carrying out in FP7.

Government of Canada agencies, stakeholders in our project and national organisations have helped a great deal in disseminating this information. We have also worked closely with partners in the Access2Canada project that was established to promote opportunities for Europeans to work with Canadian researchers on Canadian projects.

We have produced an FP7 guide and regularly publish stories about Canadian researchers in FP7 projects. Both have proven very popular. I think as a result we have had an increasing number of researchers contacting us for advice, looking for opportunities to work with their European colleagues, seeking information on calls for proposals and preparing applications.

We have also worked hard to support the policy dialogue between the EC and research programme owners in Canada – many of whom are stakeholders in the ERA-Can project. Each year, we have consulted them on areas of priority for Canada-EU science and technology cooperation and helped organise information meetings and roundtable discussions in Brussels and Ottawa. Their efforts, at the highest levels, offer another valuable path towards greater international cooperation.

How has ERA-Can evolved over the years? What changes have you implemented over the course of your directorship?

We are starting to see a deeper, more complex level of engagement from the Canadian research community. At the outset, our role was mostly to create awareness – and we are still doing a lot of that. We have to. But with more Canadians becoming involved, the number of inquiries has increased and the questions have become more complex. As a result, we have increased the number of information sessions and webinars we are holding each year. We organised two specialised legal-financial workshops for Canadian research administrators that were not in our original work plan. We have also added more detail and variety to our website, including additional research stories, lists of Canadians in FP7 projects and FAQs.

To support the policy dialogue, we have organised annual roundtable discussions that have produced focused cooperation in 10 subject areas between the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) and the EC. We expanded that effort, organising a series of programme-level cooperation meetings with programme owners across all disciplines. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the EC established a transatlantic platform to advance those discussions with programme owners in the Social Sciences in EU Member States and in North and South America. The Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada began working with the Marie Curie or PEOPLE specific programme to improve the coordination of Canadian and European calls for research training networks. Last month, we organised an international symposium on Arctic and marine research infrastructure in Rome, Italy, with support from the Canada Foundation for Innovation, the Government of Canada and the EC.

Why is it important to facilitate cooperation between Canadian and European research areas?

Canada and Europe are closely linked economically, socially and culturally. We face many of the same challenges: building and sustaining our economies, meeting the needs of ageing populations, ensuring peace, and development. We share the Atlantic and Arctic environments, and we increasingly depend on advances in telecommunications and transportation technologies, nanotechnology and biotechnology.

We also share very similar and strong research cultures, so we often seek to address broad societal challenges in similar ways. It makes sense to bring talented researchers together when they are working on the same subjects. Collectively, we can make better use of our expertise and our resources – and achieve better results.

There are many FP7 projects with Canadian participants that simply would not have been possible without international collaboration. For example, researchers at the University of Ottawa were part of an FP7 project examining a rare form of brain cancer in children (MOBI-KIDS). There were not enough cases in Canada for a truly scientific study of causation. By working with European researchers, the Canadians gained access to a much wider sample and, by working with the Canadians, their European colleagues were able to expand their research capacity and expertise, and apply their research in a different environment.

Could you offer a snapshot of some of the other collaborative health projects involving Canadian and European researchers in FP7?

The projects we have seen with Canadian partners are amazing – in all fields. Did you know that 4G wireless technology was developed by an FP6 project (the WINNER project) that included a Canadian partner, Dr Halim Yanikomeroglu, from Carleton University?

There are many examples of important research being done by Canadian and European colleagues. In the TBSUSGENT project, researchers at McGill University in Montreal are working with colleagues from the UK, Germany and Italy, as well as India and South Africa to train doctoral and postdoctoral students around the world, engaging them in the development and evaluation of new diagnostic and treatment tools for tuberculosis. The disease still affects one-third of the world’s population, largely in developing countries, and cannot be eradicated without international effort.

CIHR has worked closely with the EC to develop international cooperation in the health field. It became an FP7 National Contact Point for health in 2010 and has engaged the Commission in annual roundtable discussions, organised with ERA-Can every year since 2011.
That year, CIHR formalised an engagement in the International Rare Disease Research Consortium (IRDiRC), bringing on board Genome Canada for an investment of CAD $17 million. This major international initiative aims to produce 200 new therapies and diagnostic tools for rare diseases by 2020 – a goal that no country could achieve alone.

CIHR has also joined the Network of European Funding for Neuroscience Research (ERA-NET NEURON) and the European Research Area in Ageing (ERA-AGE), investing $1 million to support five Canadian teams in European projects on mental disorders (2010) and cerebrovascular disease (2011); and an additional $1 million for five Canadian researchers working on a range of issues related to ageing with European colleagues including: continence, hearing, work and retirement, ambient assisted living technologies and environments of ageing.

In May 2012, CIHR became the first organisation outside Europe to join the EU’s Joint Programme on Neurodegenerative Disease Research (JPND) and took an active part in the Programme’s Network of Centre of Excellence on Neurodegeneration (COEN). Canadians participated in seven of the first eight COEN grants focused on Alzheimer’s disease (AD) and related dementias.

Are you seeing a recurring theme in the type of Canadian-EU health project conducted by researchers within the Framework Programme?

Yes. CIHR engagement in European initiatives directed towards neurodegenerative diseases like AD, rare and infectious diseases, diabetes, obesity, traumatic brain injury and ageing is not a coincidence. These are also areas of priority for Canadian research and, as a result, have become the focus of many Canada-EU projects.

Currently, 298 Canadian researchers or research institutions are participating in 256 FP7 projects (2007-13), more than double the number that were involved in FP6 (2002-06). Do you foresee an exponential increase in figures for Horizon 2020, the next phase of the Framework Programme?

Yes, but the biggest news for us is that the next iteration of our project – to be called ERA-Can Plus – was launched in October 2013, and will run through to September 2016. It will be a bigger project, involving more partners on both sides of the Atlantic, and will aim to promote Canada-EU cooperation in research and innovation through EU Member State programmes, the Framework Programme, as well as Canadian provincial and federal programmes.

ERA-Can Plus will be organising many future events. So, stay tuned and check out the ERA-Can website for more information.