

Institute of Science and Technology Austria
(I.S.T. Austria)
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3400 Klosterneuburg

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EUSJA conference on I.S.T. Austria campus

International science journalists analyze institutes of excellence

The last major event before beginning the demolition work in December and – at the same time – the first international conference on the I.S.T. Austria campus was dedicated to „Institutes of Excellence in Europe – The Austrian Approach“. 40 members of the European Union of Science Journalists' Associations (EUSJA) – among them writers, reporters, editors and spokes-persons of European science publications and funding agencies – met on November 27 to discuss aspects of the subject with reference to I.S.T. Austria as an example for an institute of excellence. The conference was organised by the Austrian Club of Education and Science Journalists.

After a greeting from Elisabeth Nöstlinger, chair of the Austrian Club, Gerald Murauer gave an overview of the Austrian R&D situation and the planning details of I.S.T. Austria. Gerhard Tretzmüller, director of the department for real estate development in the administration of Lower Austria, described the site, its history and the development of the campus premises with its 18 hectares. The first buildings will be erected in 2008 and finalized in 2009, Mr. Tretzmüller pointed out as he guided a campus tour.

After the lunch break Horst Hippler, president of the technical university Karlsruhe (TU Karlsruhe), drew attention to the German excellence initiative. The TU Karlsruhe was one of the first three universities in Germany to gain the status of an elite university and therefore receive extra funding from the federal budget. The unique aspect of TU Karlsruhe is the cooperation with the research centre Karlsruhe (Forschungszentrum Karlsruhe), one of 15 institutes of the Helmholtz-Gesellschaft. Together they form Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT).

Olaf Kübler, member of KIT's International Advisory Board and chairman of I.S.T. Austria's Scientific Board focused on appointment strategies. He remarked that 500 applications and nominations had been received up to the end of November; a number he had not expected when the advertisements were published in September. Important aspects for a possible candidate are „true passion for understanding, exploration ability and building ability. In addition group leaders have to show moral authority plus generosity in co-operative scientific processes. Kübler explained the two approaches used in the search for scientists at I.S.T. Austria. On the one hand scientists from all fields are invited to apply (or recommend), on the other hand three search teams look for possible candidates in the fields of „Brain and the computer“, Material Sciences and Quantitative Biology. It is essential, Kübler proclaimed, „to get a virtuos spiral going“. This should produce positive dynamics for the further process and in the first phase.

Martin Nowak, member of the Scientific Board von I.S.T. Austria, referred to his experiences in Oxford, Princeton (Institute for Advanced Study) and (now) in Harvard as examples for successful searching for scientists. Applied to I.S.T. Austria Nowak expressed his hope that the institute could become an example for other (Austrian) universities on organising and realising first class science. Especially important: „No useless meetings“.

Haim Harari, chairman of the executive committee of I.S.T. Austria, put his convictions into a nutshell of ten principles and ten steps each. The principles include international orientation, a focus on basic research in the sciences, emphasizing multi-disciplinary approaches, one campus, appointing people not scientific fields, development of a graduate school, support of commercial exploitation of scientific findings (including intellectual property rights), diversified sources of income and communication of activities to the public.

The ten steps to success include, according to Harari, Anton Zeilinger's primal vision of a university of excellence, strict rules for the internal organisation, the funding, and the appointments of scientists and the president.

In the final discussion all four speakers underlined the overwhelming importance of the quality of appointments in the early phase of I.S.T. Austria. Horst Hippler asked to consider the fact that a co-operation of existing institutions – as handled in Germany at the moment – can produce a critical mass much earlier than a newly founded institute.

Harari, Kübler and Nowak admitted the risk but pointed out that the possibilities exceed the dangers by far.

In the evening science minister Johannes Hahn renewed his support for I.S.T. Austria in his dinner speech at the restaurant Schüttkasten in Klosterneuburg and added further examples of excellence initiatives in Austria. Wolfgang Sobotka, finance minister of Lower Austria, welcomed the participants of the conference acting as representative of the governor of Lower Austria, Erwin Pröll. Sobotka referred to the remarkable developments in Lower Austria in the fields of science and research in recent years.