

Interview with Antony Mauvais, Secretary General of The "Fondation Nationale Alfred Kastler"

by Dagmar M. Meyer

The Fondation nationale Alfred Kastler (FnAK) was founded in 1993 by the French Academy of Sciences with two principal aims: to help foreign high level scientific visitors have productive and pleasant stays in France, and to maintain a direct contact with them once they have returned home. The FnAK covers all research visitors at Ph.D. level or higher, regardless of their nationality or their scientific field, coming to work in France for more than one month (estimated to number some 8,000 persons per year). It is modelled along the lines of the Foundation Alexander von Humboldt in Germany but does not provide grants or other financial assistance to foreign scientists. The following is an interview with Antony Mauvais, Secretary General of the Kastler Foundation:

What are the services and information that the foundation provides to foreign researchers before/on arrival in France or during their stay?

We strive to provide them with all what we would ourselves need abroad; the challenge is to prevent them from having any difficulty due to their mobility in France. To begin with, we have established the necessary contacts to give ad hoc and up-to-date information (available on our Web site : www.cnrs.fr/fnak). So far, the FnAK has been able to solve the administrative problems encountered by foreign visitors and their families, such as visas and residence permit issues. More recently, we have also launched a Guest Researcher Card: the FnAK offers the holders of this card to open a bank account even before their arrival, provides various insurances at very favourable rates (health, civil liability), a welcome package, etc. The assistance of the FnAK is free of charge.

Do you also supply information to universities/research institutes?

We can be contacted either directly by the foreign researcher her/himself or by the host institute. In fact, in order to remove the obstacles to mobility, it is very important that the FnAK can share the experiences made by the host institutions. With this aim in mind, we send an e-mail "Chronicle" to international services of universities/institutes to inform them in real time of what is happening in the field, and to provide them with useful case studies and practical hints.

What kind of administrative/financial support does the FnAK receive?

The FnAK is mainly supported by two Ministries (Research and Foreign Office) and by the local authorities in Alsace Region. The operating budget is still low (about 80 000 Euros), as there are only three full time employees currently working in our office in Strasbourg. But this budget will noticeably increase in 2001, thus allowing us to improve our service, both in France and abroad.

Are you planning to extend your services in the future?

We estimate that only 5 to 10 % of the foreign researchers coming to France are in contact with the FnAK, mostly those seeking administrative or legal assistance, and services such as banking and insurances. We now hope to contact most of them as soon as they are planning their stay, and we plan to provide more free French courses and special prices on cultural and leisure activities, to organize meetings, etc. In fact, we want to open local offices, for example in the Paris area, where

40 to 50 % of the French research is being made. Extending the network in France is a major issue for the FnAK.

How do you find out about foreign researchers coming to France? Are you automatically informed about the arrival of at least certain groups of researchers, e.g. new Marie Curie fellows?

So far, there is still no systematic procedure to get in touch with researchers coming to France. Research teams and their guests do contact us on a completely voluntary basis. For instance, we do not know about the new Marie Curie fellows, and we would be grateful if they could register on our Web site, so that we could better help them.

Do you keep in touch with many of them once they have left France?

We send all of those that are registered with us a questionnaire about their stay in France and file them. Very recently, we have also launched a new Web site to maintain contact with them: France Contact (www.francecontact.net), supported by the French Home Office, and we are planning to launch a newsletter designed for the alumni. Obviously, the guest scientists currently working in France will be involved in further collaborations afterward, not only in the research field, and we have to support this.

From your experience, what are the most common problems that foreign researchers encounter when they come to France?

A new immigration policy, remarkably comparable to the American one, has come into force in France in May 1998. Still, because of little co-ordination, arbitrary interpretation is the problem the FnAK is dealing with every day. What needs to be done here is to favour best practice and to get rid of the bad ones, which is really a matter of co-ordination and networking, not only in France by the way. This is exactly where the FnAK is trying to help, because we know that the newcomers have to face many administrative services and formalities upon arrival, without being familiar with the procedures. In this aim, the FnAK needs to share its know how within the network of those welcoming guest researchers. Fortunately, there are technically no more significant differences between researchers from EU countries and others, apart from the visa issue. Nevertheless, one has to keep in mind how huge the cultural differences can be; providing researchers with accurate information doesn't prevent them from misdirection! We are to provide the good tip at the right time, and the Web site France Contact will also be of help here.

Do you think that the efforts being made at EU level will help to significantly improve the situation of foreign reseachers in France and the situation of mobile researchers in Europe in general?

Mobility has become a major concern for the EU: experts are being consulted, and there is a growing need to facilitate mobility. We can see that EU-members are becoming more aware of the problem; these are good news indeed. However, I doubt very much that we can tackle the obstacles to mobility quickly. Personally, I'm convinced that obstacles to mobility have to be tackled at a national level first, before reaching a real co-ordination in a European research area.

How do you see the role of the MCFA in France in particular and in Europe in general?

Mobility of researchers is a key to success for the EU and the EU-countries. As an association of mobile researchers, the MCFA can influence policies and act as a lobby in favour of mobility. There are two ways: praising the best practices, and complaining otherwise. In this respect, the FnAK is very interested in a closer collaboration with the MCFA. Thank you very much for this interview!

Biography

Dagmar M. Meyer (meyerd@member.ams.org) is a Board member responsible for MCFA National Groups, who was a Marie Curie fellow the LAGA, Institut Galilée, Université Paris 13, France. She is now working in algebraic topology at the University of Göttingen, Germany.