

FOCUS RESEARCH

Science for all

Focus research, the Belgian association for the advancement of science, was founded in 1987 as a non profit organisation with three objectives:

1. Developing and improving communication among researchers
2. Furthering dialog with authorities in charge of research policy
3. Popularising science

Science is to be understood in the broad sense, including the natural, applied, health, and social sciences as well as the humanities.

Focus research has contacts in all Belgian universities of the Flemish and French-speaking communities. Besides local networks, there are central teams concerned with research policy in the two communities, the publication of a journal, and popularising actions. Members are volunteers who are occupied as scientists in various positions: PhD students, postdoctoral fellows, or senior scientists and professors with long-term contracts. They are assisted by an administrative team funded by specific projects.

1. Developing and improving communication among researchers

Researchers meet in the scientific societies of their discipline and in organs of their institution. Focus Research enlarges contacts in two ways:

- The publication of a journal sent to all academic and scientific members of the universities. Expenses are supported by advertisements from public or private sources and by direct funding from universities.
- The organisation of events that unite researchers around common themes. The last initiatives were the "Sortie académique des chercheurs" in 1998 ("Can research be (dis)solved in society: on the relationships between industry and academia"), 2000 ("A PhD, and then?") and 2001 ("International mobility: Is the grass greener elsewhere?").

2. Furthering dialog with authorities in charge of research policy

Since its early days, Focus research has been campaigning for better research policy in Belgium. The first action was a campaign in 1988 about brain drain, on the theme "Researchers leave, cancer remains". Soon after that, in 1989, the "Etats généraux de la recherche" were organised to confront researchers and political authorities.

More recently, on July 6, 2000, the French-speaking section of Focus research proposed a "Mini-trip in the country of fundamental research". Members of the parliament of the French Community and their associates were invited on a bus tour of seven universities in which researchers presented their problems. Afterwards, the Commission for Higher Education and Research of the parliament auditioned members of Focus research to improve its knowledge of these problems.

Presently, Focus research has a contract with the Ministry of Higher Education and Research of the French Community to analyse the career prospects of scientists and to assess the importance of a PhD in the development of scientific careers. That project was also supported by the FNRS.

3. Popularising science

Since 1990, Focus research has been responsible for various events aimed at getting scientific information across to public opinion, through exhibitions and events that require some kind of active participation. In particular, Focus research acquired experience in actions bringing together the curiosity of young students and the expertise

of confirmed scientists. The basic idea was to establish contacts between groups of pupils in the secondary schools and researchers in universities about specific problems such as, for instance, climatic change. The latest projects in the series were:

- Transport in Brussels (1996)
- Compagnons de la recherche/Vrienden van wetenschap (1997)
- Global (ex-)change (1997, 1998)

No similar projects are presently running. In recent years, universities and public institutions have made considerable efforts to attract prospective students to scientific careers (new science museums, special science weeks, etc.). As a result, the popularisation of science has become a less prominent objective of the association. The last operations were conducted on a European level in the integrated framework of ECSITE (European Collaborative for Science, Industry and Technology Exhibitions).

Main references

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