

Pretzel with the prof at ESOF

Science for everybody, science in Europe, science in the world, science at the cutting edge – this is ESOF. Researchers of all ages, from a wide variety of disciplines and nations – this is ESOF.

The meetings; the exchange of ideas and views between individuals; scientists as well as others interested in science; form the essential heart of ESOF. The important thing is to provide good arenas for an array of meetings to occur.

The “Science Biergarten” was a perfect choice in Munich. Beneath the shade of tall trees, numerous unplanned and planned cross-community discussions on virtually anything happened all day long. This was also the place for “Pretzel with the Prof”, where top professors chatted informally with young researchers-to-be. The “social events” are also essential in fostering this kind of open community. They are an important part of ESOF – not just thanks to pleasant and interesting venues (Flugwerft Schleissheim was great) or to the delicious food and excellent music (although very much appreciated) – but because they provide a great opportunity to stroll around and chat with all kinds of people. Accidental discussions arising on unexpected topics between people who had not previously imagined they would have issues in common, will have a strong impact in the long run. The Exhibition with its informal presentations and small seminars also served as a good forum for such fortuitous contacts.

The programme primarily contained an impressive number of plenary and parallel sessions on a broad range of issues. The plenary lectures I attended were mostly brilliant overviews given by excellent specialists. Presentations on biobanks, nanotechnology, language comprehension and unintelligible subjects such as strings and black holes inspired a fascination for cutting-edge science and were described in a way that made them almost understandable to a lay person like myself. The deeply concerning lecture on Islam and science by Sadik Al-Azam, currently in the war-zone in Lebanon, was read to us. It gave a flash illustration of the present global situation of scientists further highlighting the need to get science into society and politics.

Many parallel seminars had good speakers on interesting subjects on all sorts of topics, from peer reviews and climate change to “Meeting of Minds” and science journalism. A lot was appreciated but there is also room for improvement. I would suggest more seminars and dialogues on cross-disciplinary and important science policy issues next time. And there is certainly a need to focus more on stimulating more genuine dialogues and discussions. Far too many speakers still give lengthy (academic) lectures, without any opening for comments from the audience or even for listening to the other speakers; that is without engaging in a real dialogue.

In Munich city centre there was an extensive outreach programme in the form of a science festival “Wissenschaftsommer”. It attracted large numbers of children, but during my visits the activities did not seem to attract the somewhat older young people. Neither could I discern any non-conference participants attending the open lectures. I hope I was wrong.

The conference participants were mainly scientists and science administrators – very important target groups. However, politicians, businessmen and ordinary citizens were scarce and these groups remain still to be attracted to ESOF.

Making science attractive and interesting to an increasing number of people – this is the ultimate objective of ESOF. Have the two Forums in Stockholm and Munich achieved this? Of course you can always wish for more – but in my opinion ESOF is taking valuable steps in that direction. I look forward to ESOF2008 in Barcelona.

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