

Ecsite: how did it start? Some (good) memories of the exciting early days

**by Brigitte Coutant, Director of National and international relations, Universcience
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In The Hague, we will celebrate the 25th anniversary of Ecsite. A good opportunity to share with the network the early days of this adventure which started with a bunch of 10 people and gathers today more than 1,000 participants in its annual conferences.

How and why did this initiative start? La Cité des sciences et de l'industrie in Paris kicked off the creation of Ecsite and played a significant role to make it happen.

In 1988, in charge of International development at la Cité des sciences, I convinced Joël de Rosnay, my Director at that time, that it was time for European science museums and centres to create a network.

Many of us used to attend the ASTC meeting and some were members, recognizing the professionalism and interest of this network. But we thought that there was a critical mass of institutions in Europe, and that the time was ripe to set up an equivalent European collaborative to meet the specific needs and interests of European museums and science centres and share expertise. The Deutsches museum, the Palais de la Découverte and Cité des sciences, the London museums, Heureka in Finland, Experimentarium in Denmark, and numerous brilliant institutions and personalities all were engaged in new forms of interaction with their public.

There were reasons for bringing European science centers and museums together and starting a network:

- Firstly, the specificity of **a European vision** of science, technology and society, placed in their historical, social and cultural context.
- Secondly, the need for **a coordinated strategy** for co-production and travelling of exhibitions was felt necessary.

The very first step of this initiative was the meeting which Joël de Rosnay convened with the European institutions attending the Astc conference in Boston in **1988**. The 10 institutions present agreed on the principle. Even the name was immediately launched: **ECSITE**, European Collaborative for Science Industry Exhibitions. La Cité des sciences proposed to host the **first meeting of the Ecsite group**.

I organized it in **January 1989** in La Cité with my colleagues Johanne Landry and Camille Pisani, at that time a member of the Exhibitions team. About 30 participants attended. The agenda was: which possible juridical structure for Ecsite, the exhibition planning of each participant, issues about production and travelling of multilingual exhibits. The following decisions were taken:

- Election of Richard Gregory as President of Ecsite for two years, with Melanie Quin appointed General Secretary.
- The board was to appoint a legal committee to work out the juridical statutes, a programme and financial plan.
- It was agreed to create a non-profit association, within which specific consortia could be set up in view of co-productions.

In April 1989 a first Board meeting was held at la Cité, then in July in Helsinki, hosted by **Heureka** to discuss on the constitution and work programme. Discussions went on till December 1989 on the proper juridical status for Ecsite. Initially hosted by the Nuffield foundation in London, with further financial support from the French Ministry of Research, the choice of a proper constitution for Ecsite was not easy.

I worked a lot with Melanie Quin on this topic, with the help of Jacqueline Nonon, a former Officer from the European Commission, who helped to explore all the possibilities, including the status of a European association, which was not yet possible. In this phase, the Belgian Ministry of Research and Scientific Policy was associated. The solution of a **Belgian association** appeared the most suitable.

It was not before **end of 1990** that we reached a consensus on the statutes of Ecsite and its internal regulations.

It was decided that the president would be appointed for two years. During the first years of Ecsite, the financial contribution of presiding institutions (La Cité des sciences, Deutsches Museum, Caixa...) was important. The Ecsite adventure was launched. The first conference opened on **20 June 1990** in The Hague at **Museon**, one of the active founding members.

Later, in **1996** on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of la Cité and with the support of the European Commission, I organized the Ecsite annual conference. The chosen theme was "**Europe and new educational technologies**". A theme which echoes some key strategic topics today.

It is very stimulating to look at the work accomplished since the very first meeting at la Cité in Paris. Thanks to its successive Presidents and Directors, Ecsite has evolved, increased its ambition and scope, proved its capacity to mobilize, and is today **a recognized European and international organization**.

I feel proud to have been involved in this fantastic project from the start, as Treasurer, Chair of the Programme Committee and now Vice-President.

Happy birthday Ecsite!

Brigitte Coutant, April 2014