

## A Portuguese Science Association Reaches Out

How do you change the public's perception of science in a country where it's not valued?

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Portugal is a country where being a scientist is still not considered a career by most of its population and it's a place where funding for research comes almost exclusively from government sources. It is believed, among the scientific community, that if the public is more involved in scientific research, it will better appreciate the benefits and, eventually, directly contribute to science.

Instead of just waiting for an unlikely change, a group of young Portuguese life scientists decided to work towards that goal by creating the Associação Viver a Ciência (VaC). Founded in November 2004, VaC is a unique, non-governmental, non-profit organization that seeks to establish itself at the forefront of promotion and fund-raising for science in Portugal.



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Since VaC's official launch, it has successfully undertaken various initiatives aimed at attracting private investment for research and at promoting excellence in research by Portuguese scientists. The VaC has created two privately sponsored annual prizes for young Portuguese life scientists, and has organized several science communication events aimed at different target groups, such as politicians, scientists, journalists, and the general public.

Among these events, the scientific photo competition and exhibition, "Laboratório de Imagens" (Images Laboratory), took scientific images from the lab into Lisbon's renowned Belém cultural center, and is now traveling around Portugal. The project "Science Meets the Parliament" raised the issue of how parliament gets its scientific advice through a series of meetings of both researchers and politicians. VaC has also published a booklet, *Career Scientist: a portrait of a generation on the move* (available on-line at [www.viveraciencia.org](http://www.viveraciencia.org) in an English version), which described the careers of a number of outstanding young Portuguese scientists. The VaC also organized workshops designed to improve scientists' communication skills, as well as "open days" for the public to visit several Portuguese research institutions.



Part of VaC's success is that its activities are designed and implemented by people with a research background, in many instances active scientists. This reduces some mistrust that scientists often experience when discussing their work to a wider public. In fact, all initiatives undertaken by VaC have received great support from the Portuguese scientific community. In fact, the VaC gets constant support from its almost 150 individual and group associates, mostly scientists or scientific institutions.

### **Finding the Funding**

The VaC gets the majority of its financial support from sponsors of particular projects and runs on an annual budget of approximately €140,000. Its office space is provided by the Institute for Molecular Medicine in Lisbon. This support, although crucial, is still insufficient to cover VaC's basic running costs. In early 2005, when the association was still just a good idea with no funds attached, my first two-month's salary was assured by a personal merit award won by one of VaC's founding scientists. A short while later, another collaborator was awarded a postdoctoral fellowship to join the association and then I got a postdoctoral fellowship myself. Relying on a full-time team of two postdoc fellows, and a group of half a dozen very committed volunteer founding member scientists, VaC was ready to get down to work.

Initial fundraising was met with positive responses from private companies, but the breakthrough came when a European funding proposal was accepted. This allowed VaC to pursue major activities and to work with four additional full time collaborators, which triggered other funding opportunities and partnerships. Present and past project sponsors include the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the European Commission, the British Council, the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, and various biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies and city councils.

For a small organization such as VaC, it is difficult to achieve the goal of attracting private funding for science in Portugal without, to some extent, resort to governmental support. VaC's basic operating costs are met through this avenue. I'm hopeful this will be progressively less critical as the private sector realizes their role in promoting both scientific research and culture.

In a country where philanthropy for science is almost non-existent, organizations like VaC face enormous challenges. Nonetheless, I believe VaC is already making a difference because it is in the process of changing attitudes towards science and scientists in Portugal. In evaluating the impact of the Career Scientist booklet, a recent questionnaire revealed that between 70% and 97% of the respondents declared a positive change in their perception of science or scientists. On our initiatives targeting scientists (workshops, meetings, and the web site) we also see a change in attitude toward better communication of their work with the media and the general public. Also, several invitations by radio and television to adapt one of the VaC publications for airing and a TV documentary reveal the media's high interest in scientific issues.

This model may well be duplicated in other regions where science is not viewed in the most positive light. To change public perceptions, one needs to stay very focused on your strategy, ensure that there is a minimal administrative structure at the beginning (to prevent from spending too much time solving bureaucratic issues later on), and aggressively seeking and securing a steady source of funding to cover operational costs. It is also useful to have among your founding members or volunteers someone who can play the role of ambassador and be the public face of your organization.

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