

The Lorentz Center: A short account of its history

by
Wim van Saarloos
director, Lorentz Center
1997- 2009

The Lorentz Center (<http://www.lorentzcenter.nl>) was founded in the early nineties by Bert Peletier (a mathematician), Tim de Zeeuw (an astronomer) and myself (physics). We had all come to appreciate workshop centers in the USA, and were able to convince Leiden University to start such a center in Leiden. The fact that Leiden University gave us the opportunity to give it a try by donating a floor in the Oort building and a small working budget, was in hindsight quite amazing given that we had not been able to convince our national funding agency NWO to found a national workshop center.

The LC opened in 1997, and I have been part-time director since the fall of 1997, combining it with my job as a physicist in Leiden. I started with a part-time secretary and without national funding. Over the years our niche has become short workshops of one to two (sometimes three) weeks. With workshop we mean a highly interactive, often interdisciplinary meeting in a stimulating atmosphere with lots of discussions. During the first nine years the LC focused on astronomy, computer science, mathematics and physics, but in 2006 we broadened the mission to the life sciences. Moreover, in the same year, we started a collaborative program with NIAS in Wassenaar, an advanced study institute in the humanities and social sciences, to organize interdisciplinary workshops that transcend the natural sciences. In addition, NIAS now has two Lorentz Fellows who spend their sabbatical at NIAS to work at the interface of our disciplines.



Initially, the LC thus started with no outside funding at all. Quite soon, the Dutch physics funding agency FOM was generous enough to give the LC a start-up grant of the order of k€50 per year for support of physics workshops; soon thereafter the NWO division "EW" for astronomy, mathematics and informatics contributed a similar amount for workshops in these fields. Both of these grants were renewed around 2002, around

the time that most program advisory boards were established. An enormous step forward was made in 2006, when the ministry of science and education OCW awarded the LC a special grant of k€360 per year for the period 2006-2010, and when FOM and NWO-EW renewed their grants also for the same period, with budgets of

k€150 from FOM and k€100 from NWO-EW. The grant from OCW made it possible to broaden our mission to the life sciences, and to start the collaborative program with NIAS. These external budgets are used to support workshops, which have been approved by the boards: for a typical workshop of about a week we are able to allocate a budget for the organizers of the order of k€10; this budget can be used to pay (part of) the local expenses or travel for a large part of the participants. In addition, many workshop organizers are able to raise additional outside funds for their workshops – in total an amount of order k€200 is brought in this way each year.

The funding scheme and organizational model that has emerged over the years is that the external agencies pay for the cost of a workshop (housing and travel of participants) while the faculty of natural sciences of Leiden University pays the operating budget of the facility. The latter budget has steadily grown over the years too: in 2009 the annual budget is about k€300. This budget is used mostly for the salaries of the staff – the rent of the floor space, cleaning and technical support is contributed “in kind”. When these are taken into account too, the contribution to the center from Leiden University is of order k€600 per year; this amount is comparable to the total external funding for workshops.

Every workshop center, which wants to attract national funding and has the ambition to become a national asset, has to develop a convincing view on how it contributes to the health of science in its home country. To be frank, the fact that our mission is rather broad, was initially more born out of necessity than a deliberate decision. Mono-disciplinary centers in the major European countries usually have a large enough national community in the field of their mission that they can continue to run year round programs in which a sufficient number of scientists from the home country participates. But in the Netherlands the science community in any single field is too small to support a workshop center this way. On the other hand, the smallness of the Netherlands also has an advantage: there are five other major universities within an hour’s travel from Leiden University, and from the other universities it is possible to travel to Leiden by public transport in 2 to 3 hours. Hence it is relatively easy for researchers from other universities to come to a meeting at the Lorentz Center for one or more days. Based on this, it became clear over the years that a successful workshop center in a small country like the Netherlands should be multidisciplinary and take advantage of the closeness of all the other universities in the country. Our challenge is to do this without giving up an international outlook and openness and without using quota for the participation of scientists from the Dutch research community.



Because we span quite a large number of scientific fields, the LC has steadily gained a reputation for being a nice place to have multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary workshops, but we

deliberately choose to attract strong mono-disciplinary workshops as well. From the preface of our scientific reports, which can also be downloaded from our webpage, you'll see that the LC has steadily grown over the years. The past couple of years we have been close to our maximum capacity in the current set-up: About 40 meetings per year, with almost 2000 workshop participants; 40-45% of our participants are from other European countries, about 35% from the Netherlands, and somewhat over 15% from the USA. The decision about which workshops to accept are nowadays taken by the program advisory boards. The members are selected to reflect the (inter)national character of the center and are deliberately chaired by scientists from outside Leiden.

The accessibility of the center to researchers from within the country also makes it easier than in large countries to allow young researchers – postdocs as well as graduate students – to take advantage of the workshops in the Lorentz Center. Although the number of participants at a workshop is restricted, we do have an open door policy for senior as well as junior researchers from the Netherlands. In practice, this never actually leads to



real capacity problems. Originally, this open door policy for young researchers partly arose in response to pressure by the funding agencies, especially FOM. Over the years both the boards and the staff have come to view the participation of junior scientists as one of the assets of the LC: after all, in the natural sciences there is a shortage of young people entering our fields, and they often find the exciting atmosphere and the natural mix of established and junior researchers very stimulating. Many of them owe a later postdoc position or collaboration with foreign colleagues to the contacts made at one of our workshops. Nowadays, the active participation of junior researchers is one of the criteria the program advisory boards take into account in the evaluation of proposals.



The LC has 20 offices which are fully equipped, so each participant has his or her own office space during a workshop (typically 30-40 people, but we can accommodate up to 55), and we aim at workshops where there is a substantial amount of time for informal discussions, brainstorming, one-on-one discussions, etc. A typical workshop day consists of say some talks from 10-12 in the morning, and some

after 3.30 or 4, with time in between for personal interactions.

My vision in building up the organization of the LC has always been that I would want the center to run in the way that I would like any center, that I would visit myself, to be organized: I would come there to do science, so I would not want to be bothered by organizational details, filling in forms, etcetera – active scientists like you and me should be bothered as little as possible with trivial organizational matters and even the organizers of workshops should be able to spend almost 100% of their time at the LC on science. Therefore, the LC organizational model is that the local organization of each workshop is in the hands of *one* workshop coordinator, so that the organizers and participants have to deal with one person only, who is responsible for every aspect of the organization. Moreover, office keys, computer logins and instructions for how to get onto the wireless internet, should be waiting for participants upon their arrival. If you have any suggestions for making our workshops even more successful, do let us know!

Leiden, January 2009

The Lorentz Center: Update on staff and funding

January 2011

The core of the staff of the LC is presently formed by:

- The three workshop coordinators, Gerda Filippo, Corrie Kuster and Ikrâm Çakir, who run the workshops.
- The executive manager, Mieke Schutte, who is in charge of the daily operation of the center
- Henriette Jensenius, in charge of the scientific planning and evaluation, dedicated to assisting the boards and the developments of new workshops. She is assisted by Auke Planjer
- Arjen Doelman, director of the LC and professor of mathematics in Leiden

Both Mieke and Henriette have a PhD in science, so they know the passion of doing science from their own experience. Arjen has a joint appointment between the LC (40%) and the mathematics department (60%).

Finally, the computer network is maintained by the excellent system administrators of the astronomy department – this ensures that there always are several system administrators available who can help on short notice. In a similar fashion, we can build on the help and support of many people in the science faculty complex – the fact that we are fully embedded organizationally in the science faculty is one of the secrets behind running a relatively large operation with a small dedicated staff!

In 2010, funding was secured for the coming 5 years from FOM and, quite exceptionally, from all sections of NWO, albeit in different proportions. This latter, broad support prompted a bonus from the ‘Algemeen bestuur’, which allows LC to expand the activities in the coming period. The past few year the Lorentz Center has been operating at full capacity with more than 45 workshop weeks per year and an increasing number of proposals. With the ambition to increase the activities in computational and life sciences and expand into chemistry and earth sciences, the plan is to open a second facility shortly.

