

Growing role for EUREKA in European research funding

"Despite national budgetary difficulties, EUREKA is growing," insisted Michel Vieillefosse, Head of the EUREKA Secretariat during a round table, animated by freelance journalist Jean-Louis Courleux, on the evaluation and future of the inter-governmental Initiative at the European Research and Innovation event in Paris on 3 June. "Some 1,300 million Euro of public and private funding will have been committed to EUREKA new projects before the end of the Dutch Chair year in mid 2005."

EUREKA has evolved greatly over the past 20 years as it has increased from 18 member countries to 36. However, its bottom-up approach remains strong, applicable to any type of project with no exclusions and involving companies big and small, universities and research centres. Key criteria continue to be innovative content, market need and the quality of the team. The only limitation is for at least two countries to be involved.

SMEs now participate to a much greater degree - over 40% - in innovative projects and strategic initiatives. And EUREKA continues to develop highly successful projects - such the ITEA Cluster project responsible for the introduction of common European software for cars from 2009. "We are continuing to change," added Vieillefosse. "We are developing strategic initiatives in new sectors - such as biotechnologies. And we starting to provide a relay for finance in innovation."

International co-operation essential

Gerard Matheron, director of the MEDEA+ Cluster office, highlighted EUREKA's success in micro- and nanoelectronics. "It involved a persistent effort to catch up originally; it is now accelerating the transition to an information society," he said. This success is clearly demonstrated by the presence of three European chipmakers in the global top ten and European leadership of the worldwide lithographic equipment market.

"We are all convinced we need to co-operate," he added. "Thanks to the environment created by EUREKA, international programmes such as JESSI, MEDEA and MEDEA+ have turned European 'competitors' into partners, made 'co-opetition' a normal way of working, contributed to improved competitiveness and helped create a

climate in which bilateral co-operation and 'eco-systems' could emerge - boosting European employment."

MEDEA+ believes there is a need to increase the impact of European R&D programmes on the information and communications technology (ICT) industry by enhancing coordination between EUREKA and EU Framework Programmes. At the same time, it would like to see more harmonisation of funding procedures, better synchronisation of the processes and increased commitment to EUREKA funding.

Judging competence

France Telecom has long believed in co-operative research, with involvement in the ITEA, MEDEA+ and now CELTIC Clusters. "We have always been very active in EUREKA," said Yves Ruggeri of France Telecom R&D. "We have been involved in some 40 EUREKA projects, with 100 partners."

Such co-operation allows the company to work with good partners, limits the risk of strategic failure and maximises the chances of success. It reduces the cost of innovative technologies and makes it possible to develop standards together - making them more effective. It also provides additional sources of finance. Moreover, it provides an effective way of judging the competence of potential new suppliers and commercial partners.

Ruggeri's experience shows the many benefits, including: working side by side with industry in open consortia; functional flexibility; clear separation between finance and technology; and having the resources to go to complete demonstrators, including new components. He also appreciated the effective use of patents and good reporting.

Working on equal terms

French SME S.C.P.S. highlighted the advantages it had obtained through participation in two EUREKA projects: 3D STRUCTURES and NITIN SCOOTER. As a result of this work this applied research company was the recent winner of the EUREKA 2005 Lillehammer Award for its development of economically viable nickel-zinc (NiZn) batteries for portable appliances and hybrid cars.

"EUREKA projects offered a real partnership for us even as an SME - we were not considered as under guardianship but were working on equal terms," said chief

executive Jacques Doniat. "Moreover, it allows SMEs to keep the technology developed - and guarantees confidentiality."

Confidentiality is an important issue for EUREKA and is taken very seriously. Big and small companies can work well together in this area by making a good framework agreement that includes use and ownership of intellectual property. As Yves Ruggeri pointed out: "Even big companies can suffer from piracy - but I have never seen it happen in a EUREKA project."