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Building research networks through Eureka

It has no funding mechanism and no central budget, but the Eureka initiative is still proving successful, writes

The EU's seventh framework programme for research (FP7) gets plenty of attention, but it is not the only research game in town. Another system for organising pan-European collaborative industrial research exists in the form of the Eureka initiative.

It is a network that consists of the 27 governments of the EU and ten non-EU countries – Croatia, Serbia, Federal Republic of Macedonia, Russian Federation, Ukraine, Turkey, Iceland, Monaco, Republic of San Marino and Israel. It has no funding mechanism and there is no central budget for supporting research projects. Instead, experts help companies to develop their project proposals and to find partners in other countries and private funding.

Recent projects have resulted in a portable explosives detector for use at security checkpoints, a sensor that reduces harmful diesel engine emissions by 90% and a new technology to restore some vocal capacity to patients with cancer of the larynx. There are currently 693 projects running, each involving two or more countries.

According to Luuk Borg, head of the Eureka secretariat in Brussels, companies are still keen to launch collaborative research projects despite the current financial climate. "We expected the number of project proposals to go down. However, we have had a slight increase in the number of projects coming in," he says. "And the number of good project proposals has also increased."

Expert panel

Proposals are evaluated by an independent panel of experts. If endorsed by Eureka, companies apply to their member states for national funding. The Netherlands is one of the countries that prioritises Eureka projects for national programme funds. But many countries do not and this reliance on uncertain national funding is a risk to the network. Luke Georghiou, professor of science and technology policy and management in the Manchester Institute of Innovation Research, says: "Any activity that depends on public funding faces challenges. Eureka is more exposed than the framework programme, as funding is not secured."

Georghiou is a long-standing observer of Eureka's market impact. Reforms to maximise its relevance and effectiveness have involved moving from smaller projects to setting up so-called clusters at the end of the 1990s – long-term collaborations with a large number of participants to develop and commercially exploit generic technologies.

"Clusters have been very successful mechanisms, which have attracted considerable resources. Industry-led and non-bureaucratic, they have formed the basis of a couple of the EU's Joint Technology Initiatives, on embedded software and nanoelectronics," says Georghiou.

Up-front public funding

More recently, in partnership with the EU, Eureka has secured a six-year stream of public funding up-front, for high-technology small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Providing around 75 million jobs in Europe, SMEs already made up a high proportion of Eureka project participants.

Launched in 2007, the six-year Eurostars programme pools €300 million from 31 Eureka countries with €100m from FP7. It part-finances projects from companies with fewer than 250 employees and that spend at least 10% of their turnover or staff on R&D activity. In turn, the sector is also expected to mobilise €400m. "The number of Eurostars proposals has gone up by around 30% this year," says Borg. But he is concerned that the current economic climate will take its toll.

"To apply for Eurostars money, SMEs have to secure their share of funding up-front. Where will they find the money? We don't know this yet. Maybe at the end of the day they can't deliver and the projects won't go ahead."

EUREKA The economic crisis is causing concerns. ARCHIVE