

University-industry relationship key to technology transfer, agrees innovation panel

'I was very surprised and quite glad to hear that, from the Commission point of view, universities will continue to play a very strong role in the innovative process,' Yves Poulet, a professor of law at the universities of Namur and Liège in Belgium told CORDIS News on 12 November.

Professor Poulet had been responsible for moderating a round table on research and innovation at the event to launch the Sixth Framework Programme (FP6) in Brussels on 13 November. He found that a discussion on the 'Jeekyll and Hyde' role of researchers had been particularly beneficial to those who attended the session.

The observation was raised by Anders Flodström, Director of the Royal Institute of Technology in at Stockholm University. Describing the Swedish model as 'unique', Professor Flodström described how a political decision not to create research institutes has seen universities taking on that role.

'Swedish researchers have a Jeekyll and Hyde role,' said Professor Flodström. 'In the morning they can carry out free research, and in the afternoon they are doing strategic contract research.' Professor Flodström compared the situation in Europe with that in the USA, and particularly at the renowned Stanford University, where 'money is coming in without ties.' In Europe on the other hand, 'they [enterprises] are paying for something so you have to achieve something. It's contractual.'

'I think it is a very big problem within universities for a professor to play an active role in the development of the relationship between universities and enterprise,' Professor Poulet told CORDIS New, emphasising that the problem 'needs to be addressed directly within the universities. [...] You have a university dedicated to education and basic research. Apart from these activities, a certain number of academics would also like to develop research activities in cooperation with enterprise,' he said.

Jürgen Wüst, Managing Director of KEIM in Germany explained why some universities may be against their staff also having a role in industry. 'Teaching is the most important thing at universities - the quality and the students. We shouldn't forget this.' He called however for a 'creative core' of professors to be embedded in the technology transfer process.

Attitudes towards joint university and industry roles are, as one may expect, different across Europe. In Italy, university staff are not allowed to sit on a company board of directors. Professor Poulet pointed to a study initiated by DG Enterprise 'which indicates clearly that more than 28 per cent of spin-offs are located in the UK and have been developed by universities in the UK. 'When you compare these figures with the figures in southern countries, it's incredible,' he said. 'So it seems that the culture in English universities is more open to relationships with companies and with external bodies,' concluded Professor Poulet.

Professor Poulet has personal experience of the difficulties that such cultural differences can cause as he is currently involved in the creation of an inter-university network. 'We are discussing with Norwegian people, English people, Spanish people and German people. All these partners have different mentalities, different legal structures, different social statutes for the researcher. It is really very difficult to create these pan-European institutes that we would like to have.' Professor Poulet does however believe that such networks are fundamental to innovation.

Rachel Fletcher, Managing Director of Beta Technologies, the UK national contact point for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), highlighted the issue of expectations, both on the part of enterprises and universities, and the impact that these can have on relationships.

'There is a difference between what industry expects and wants,' said Ms Fletcher. They expect excellent research, a commitment to the project and for the results to be on time, she explained. In addition, they also want short term submission, as it is very difficult for enterprises, particularly SMEs, to think in terms of five year projects. Industry also wants multidisciplinary research, said Ms Fletcher, as the research it requires often relates to a number of university departments. 'But all SMEs are different,' claimed Ms Fletcher. 'It is not possible for universities to say 'if we work like this, we'll be able to work with SMEs', ' she emphasised.

Discussing the role of innovation in the FP6, Enterprise Director-General Jean-Paul Mingasson claimed that 'it is natural that innovation should form an integral part of the Sixth Framework Programme.' It is important that European innovation policy should reinforce the innovation base through networking and experiment with new approaches in order to stimulate innovation, he added.

Director of DG Enterprise's innovation unit Giulio Grata commented that the large turnout for the innovation session, certainly more than 1.4 per cent of the conference participants, the percentage of FP6 funds which shall be channelled towards innovation showed that 'the topic of innovation is a serious one and that no opportunity must be missed to exchange views.'

Under FP6's first specific programme, 10 million euro will be available for innovation activities, explained Dr Grata. The funding will be used to carry out further studies on specific innovation policy issues, including analysis of the administrative and regulatory environment. The innovation unit will also continue the Community Innovation Survey and the Trend Chart on Innovation in Europe. Networking players and users will continue to be a priority, under such initiatives as the Pilot action of excellence for innovative start-ups (PAXIS) and the Gate2Growth incubator forum. Transregional cooperation will be encouraged and the unit will continue to provide support through the innovation relay centres, helpdesks and CORDIS.

In order to analyse and evaluate innovation in EU funded research projects, integrated projects under FP6 should be regarded as 'a large-scale laboratory for innovation,' said Dr Grata.

Deputy Director-General of DG Enterprise, Heinz Zourek, concluded the session with a plea to national governments to 'go ahead with the Community patent and not to sit around talking about political and unimportant (except politically) issues such as language.'

*Data Source Provider : CORDIS News attendance at the FP6 launch conference
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