Research: towards a European area

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PURPOSE : Commission Communication to investigate ways of progressing towards a better organisation of research in Europe and to put forward suggestions for consideration and debate. CONTENT : By the creation of new products, processes and markets, research and technology provide one of the principal driving forces of economic growth, competitiveness and employment. They are the best way of modernising European companies, which is necessary to improve Europe's competitive position. The Communication compares European investment in research and the growth of jobs with that of the United States. The Commission believes that the current situation concerning research in Europe is worrying, and produces figures to support this contention. Notably, the average research effort in the Union is currently only 1.8% of Europe's GDP, as against 2.8% in the United States and 2.9% in Japan. The gap is increasing. The trade balance in high tech products has shown a deficit of EUR 20 billion per year in Europe over the past ten years, and this deficit seems to be increasing. The principal reference framework for research activities is national funding. At the European level, it is the Union's framework programme for research, which accounts for only about 5.4% in financial terms of the total public effort. Decompartmentalisation and better integration of Europe's scientific and technological area is an indispensable condition for invigorating research. A European research area should embrace the following aspects: - a stock of material resources and facilities optimised at the European level. This includes the networking of centres of excellence and the creation of virtual centres of excellence, in particular universities and companies. It also includes the development of a European approach to infrastructures covering the creation of new installations and the functioning of existing ones. Better use of the potential offered by electronic networks must be encouraged. - more coherent use of public instruments and resources. This involves a more co-ordinated implementation of national and European research programmes and closer relations between European organisations for scientific and technological cooperation. - more dynamic private investment. This includes the better use of fiscal instruments for indirect support to research, and the development of effective tools for the protection of intellectual property. The European patent must be started up as soon as possible. Europe must encourage the creation of high-tech companies by researchers, or companies where researchers have a stake in the capital. The level of risk capital investment in high tech sectors must be increased. Initiatives aken could be built upon. - a common system of scientific and technical reference for policy implementation. The JRC could play a significant role in the establishment of a common system. - more abundant and more mobile human resources. Greater mobility of researchers in Europe should be encouraged, as should the introduction of a European dimension to scientific careers. There should be a greater place and role for women inresearch, and young people should be made more aware of careers in research. - a dynamic European landscape, open and attractive to researchers and investment. The regions should have a reinforced role in the European research effort. - an area of shared values, which is the result of the development of a shared vision of the ethical issues of science and technology. There is an urgent need for a broad-based debate. The range of possibilities provided by the Treaty should be re-examined and a full panoply of instruments available to the union should be brought into play.