Science and technology: guidelines for future European Union policy to support research

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PURPOSE : to present the Commission's communication on science and technology, the key to Europe's future - Guidelines for future European Union policy to support research.

CONTENT : there has been a massive response to the Union's Sixth Research Framework Programme 2002-2006. To date, taking all actions together, 28 000 research proposals have been submitted involving 150 000 institutions in 50 countries. 200 major transnational research networks and projects have been launched in areas such as "post-genomic" drug-targeting methods and nanometre-scale microelectronic components, as well as 55 programme networking actions on subjects such as food safety and rare diseases. However, the Framework Programme has been the victim of its own success. Out of the thousands of proposals received, only 1 in 5 has been able to be supported due to the lack of funding. In particular, just under 50% of projects considered to be of a very high standard were able to be financed. Europe does not have sufficient capacity to transform knowledge into products and services, in particular commercial ones, making an economic success of them. European companies apply for 170 patents each year per million inhabitants, compared with 400 for American companies. And the Union's commercial deficit for high-tech products is approximately EUR 23 billion per year.

In order to increase the impact of the European Union's action, it is proposed to organise it around six major objectives. To launch the corresponding activities with a significant effect, the Union's research budget needs to be increased by the proportions indicated. Funding would be allocated according to three principles: a balance between current and new activities; between research for the advancement of knowledge and its industrial application; and between support for human and material research capabilities. The six major objectives are as follows : creating European centres of excellence through collaboration between

Laboratories; launching European technological initiatives; stimulating the creativity of basic research through competition between teams at European level; making Europe more attractive to the best researchers; developing research infrastructures of European interest; improving the coordination of national research programmes.

Furthermore, the Commission has highlighted two additional areas : helping to implement European space policy and placing research at the service of security (the security of individuals, the State, transport and telecommunications networks in the face of organised crime and international terrorism, in particular bioterrorism).

The Commission reinforces the idea that it is necessary to strengthen complementarity between the use of the Union's research budget and the Structural Funds, in particular in the framework of the future "Strategic Union guidelines for cohesion". Moreover, it states that it is necessary to increase their combined use, for example by granting complementary funding from the Structural Funds where a research project co-financed by the Framework Programme is carried out in a "Convergence" Objective region.

At the same time, it is necessary to improve the regulatory and administrative environment. The aim is to increase the transparency of the evaluation process, to reduce delays, and to minimise the cost of preparing projects. The financial and administrative provisions must be revised and simplified in the light of the experience of current practice.