Passing over to Poland

Mariusz Piskuła, Director of the Institute of Animal Reproduction and Food Research PAS, assesses how research organisations can transfer innovation by partnering with industry...

The spending of the European Structural Funds planned for 2007-2013 is now coming to an end. Due to its significant potential, the Polish agri-food sector, with its R&D environment, has been the beneficiary of these funds. Through Polish intermediary institutions operating at national and regional level, large amounts of EU money have contributed to the creation of new facilities with hi-tech equipment as up-to-date as any in Europe. Needless to say, such funding was granted only to organisations that showed a level of excellence and came mainly through the Innovative Economy Operational Programme. In addition to investments in R&D infrastructures, funds were also allocated to research. All these activities are characterised by innovation, intellectual property rights protection, transfer of knowledge into practice, economic growth and job creation. Brussels also directly supports scientific organisations located within EU Convergence Regions (for instance, by the RegPot programme), which, if granted complementary subsidiary funding, can become a driver of regional economic growth.

> 'It is estimated that private investment in research in Poland is below 0.2% GDP while national investment is close to 0.6% GDP, and this situation is unlikely to change without introducing systemic changes.'

National funding of research in Poland is very low, and without additional support from EU Structural Funds, the level of Polish R&D infrastructures would remain so for the foreseeable future. Within the perspective of the next Framework Programme, Horizon 2020, research leading to innovation will be the main aim of EU funding. The most obvious barrier to scientific institutions in Poland that want to exploit such support is the Public Procurement Law, which kills their innovation and competitiveness, as it involves time-consuming bidding processes, generating an increase of the overall research cost by up to 20%. It may appear exaggerated but according to this law, discoveries – the inseparable element of innovation – have to be foreseen one year in advance, which is absurd.

But so far, so good. It seems that many Polish research organisations have grown strong enough to be an effective partner for cooperation with industry. But it takes two to tango. Attracting agri-food industry, the addressee of knowledge transfer, is difficult. There are two immediate diagnoses of this situation. Firstly, the main activities of research entities funded nationally by the Polish government often do not address the real needs of industry. Secondly, the business sector is simply not interested in investing in innovation. Each of these diagnoses is true to some extent. Poor communication between the science and the business necessary for the identification of common needs and expectations underpins the first, but the causes underpinning the second are more complex. The major part of Polish agri-food business is controlled by global companies that pursue their investment goals by implementing innovative solutions developed in their own R&D units, which are located worldwide. Only one such company has decided to open its R&D unit in Poland. The other manufacturers operating in this sector are SMEs and microenterprises who do not have funds for innovation or are satisfied with their current scale of activity. On the other hand, businesses that have the financial capacity are reluctant to take the risk connected with investments, especially during the current economic downturn.

It is estimated that private investment in research in Poland is below 0.2% GDP while national investment is close to 0.6% GDP, and this situation is unlikely to change without introducing systemic changes. It will certainly take a long time to achieve a two-third share of private investment in financing research institutions, which is the level in more developed European countries, or the 3% GDP dedicated to this aim in the Nordic region. However, there recently appears to be a possibility to change this situation. From 2013, companies in Poland will be allowed to allocate 1% of their income tax bill to scientific institutions. This should indirectly stimulate the allocating company's interest in what research organisations have to offer and what benefits they may gain as a result of engaging in such cooperation.

Mariusz Piskuła
Director, Institute of Animal Reproduction and Food Research
Polish Academy of Sciences (PAS)
Coordinator, REFRESH Project (FP7 EU-RegPot-2010-1-264103)
Tel: +48 89 523 46 86
m.piskula@pan.olsztyn.pl
http://pan.olsztyn.pl/en