

EUROPEAN SCIENCE & RESEARCH NEWS

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European science & research news

Alarming stagnation of R&D intensity in Europe

On 19 July 2005, the European Commission presented the 'Key Figures 2005 for science, technology and innovation' which show stagnating trends in R&D investments and innovation in Europe. The rate of growth in the intensity of R&D (R&D expenditure as a percentage of GDP) has been declining since 2000 and is now close to zero. The report shows that the European Union is not investing enough in R&D, is attracting less and less mobile investment from multinationals, fails to offer attractive careers for researchers, nor a stimulating environment for funding new technology. China's R&D intensity, on the other hand, has been growing at around 10 per cent annually since 1997. At this rate China will catch up with the EU by 2010 in terms of R&D intensity.

The report and Commissioner Potočnik's speech and presentation are available on: www.cordis.lu/indicators/

Members of European Research Council's Scientific Council announced

On 18 July, the European Commission announced the names of 22 eminent scientists who will serve as the founding members of the Scientific Council of the European Research Council (ERC), a funding organisation for frontier research proposed by the European Commission under the Seventh Research Framework Programme (2007-2013). The Scientific Council will be an independent body whose role is to determine the ERC's scientific strategy and ensure that its work is conducted on the basis of scientific excellence. The 22 scientists were chosen by an independent panel of high-level scientists, chaired by former European Commissioner Chris Patten.

See <http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/05/956&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

France: Creation of competitiveness clusters

On 12 July, the French Government announced the creation of 67 'pôles de compétitivité' (competitiveness clusters). The clusters represent regional partnerships involving firms, education and training institutions and public or private research organisations focussed on research development and innovation in a defined project area. The selected clusters are entitled to financial support from the French Government which has allocated 1.5 billion Euro over three years. Of the 67 'pôles', six have been designated as 'world class' with privileged access to funding, accelerated administrative processes and priority in the allocation of new permanent research positions. The six world class clusters are located in Paris/Ile-de-France (health, i.e. cancer treatment and infectious diseases, software development and complex systems); Lyon (virology); Grenoble (nanotechnology); Toulouse (aeronautics) and Rousset (communication materials and software). More information is available on: www.cordis.lu

Positive assessment of COST mechanism by expert panel

An expert panel designated by the European Commission has concluded that the European Cooperation in the field of Scientific and Technical Research (COST) is a suitable mechanism for contribution to the Lisbon and Barcelona goals. It found that COST's simple and responsive structure and operating principles make it particularly appropriate for involving new countries and new research groups. Given the successful reform of COST's science management, the expert panel recommended to grant the full 80 million Euro foreseen under the Sixth Framework Programme to the European Science Foundation (ESF) which provides COST's scientific secretariat.

A copy of the Mid Term Review Report can be found on: <http://www.cordis.lu/coordination/cost.htm>

EU visa policy for foreign researchers: faster and more flexible procedures

To attract more foreign researchers to the EU, the EU Council of Ministers has urged member states to issue short-stay visas to researchers more easily and to waive administrative fees. The recommendation adopted by the Council on 18 July is not legally binding, and is intended as a stop-gap measure pending adoption of a draft directive on the same subject. Full article can be purchased on <http://eisnet.eis.be>

EU policy developments affecting science & research

European Council agrees to reduced EU budget for 2006 - Commission criticises cuts in research budget

EU Member States reached agreement at the ECOFIN meeting on 15 July to a draft budget for 2006 which is reduced by 1.14 billion Euro in payment appropriations compared to the European Commission's initial proposal. This brings the budget down to 111.42 billion Euro which represents 1.01% of Gross National Income (GNI) of the EU (compared to 1.02% according to the Commission draft). The Commission disputed the reduction of 428.75 million Euro in research spending, while the British presidency stressed that the agreed research budget was up

12% compared to the 2005 budget. Commission budget spokeswoman Ewa Hedlund criticised the UK presidency on the grounds that “their rhetoric does not match the reality”. The Presidency defended the Council’s stance by pointing out that the Commission had underspent on research by 138 million Euro in 2005. France supported the British position: “It is not because we are against research, but because there is too much money and not enough programmes.”

Eight EU initiatives to support growth and jobs

The European Commission published the ‘Community Lisbon Programme’ on 20 July 2005 outlining eight key measures to be taken at EU level in order to boost growth and create more jobs by making Europe a more attractive place in which to invest and work. These eight measures are: ‘supporting knowledge and innovation in Europe’; ‘reform state aid policy’; ‘improvement and simplification of the regulatory framework in which business operates’; ‘completion of the internal market for services’; ‘completion of an ambitious agreement in the Doha round of trade negotiations’; ‘removal of obstacles to physical, labour and academic mobility’; ‘developing a common approach to economic migration’; and ‘supporting efforts to deal with the social consequences of economic restructuring’.

For more information see http://europa.eu.int/growthandjobs/index_en.htm

Developments in thematic areas of potential relevance for Australia

France authorises restricted import of stem cell lines

Nine ministerial orders published in France’s official journal on 23 July 2005 give restricted license to a number of national research institutes to import human embryonic stem cells, to cultivate and to conduct research on them for five years. The stem cells will be imported from the United States and Israel.

See <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/WAspad/Visu?cid=743469&indice=1&table=JORF&ligneDeb=1>

Germany to fund clinical studies with 30 million Euro

The German Federal Ministry for Education and Research and the German Research Foundation (DFG) will be providing 30 million Euro to strengthen clinical research in Germany between now and 2008.

See: <http://www.gesundheitsforschung-bmbf.de/de/175php> and http://www.dfg/forschungsfoerderung/einzelfoerderung/klinische_studien/

European scientists argue case for Extremely Large Telescope

Scientists from the EU funded OPTICON project have formally argued the case for the construction of the European Extremely Large Telescope (ELT) – an optical telescope the size of a sports field that could watch the seasons change on a planet orbiting a star on the other side of the galaxy. See: <http://www.astro-opticon.org>

CRONUS-EU: New research project to understand the earth’s surface

CRONUS-EU, an EU-funded research project, will seek to establish a better chronology of the Earth’s surface events. Using cosmic rays, scientists will be able to date changes in landscapes with greater accuracy. Nine research teams from Europe will work closely with a parallel initiative involving 13 universities from the US and funded by the National Science Foundation. For more information see: <http://www.cronus-eu.net>

European Commission report on patent laws on biotechnology and genetic engineering

The European Commission has adopted a second report (COM(2005)312) to the Council and European Parliament covering developments and implications of patent law in the field of biotechnology and genetic engineering. It focuses on issues in the area of patents relating to gene sequences and the patentability of inventions relating to stem cells. It also reports on the implementation of the Biotechnology Directive 98/44/EC.

For more information see: http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/internal_market/en/indprop/invent/index.htm

Highlights on upcoming S&R events

World Science Forum in Hungary

The Hungarian Academy of Science, together with UNESCO and the International Council for Science (ICSU), will be holding the second World Science Forum in Budapest from 10-12 November 2005. The Forum will deal with ethical aspects of knowledge and the responsibility of scientists. For more information see: <http://www.sciforum.hu/>

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