Red-tape tangle

Attempts by the European Union to stimulate innovation are stifled by bureaucracy.

The damning report released by auditors last week on the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) was predictable. Since it was conceived about 10 years ago, the EIT — a €3-billion (US$3.4-billion) mechanism that is supposed to stimulate innovation in areas that are considered to be among Europe's foremost societal challenges — has suffered more than just teething problems (see page 291).

As the auditors pointed out, the EIT has struggled to align business and research communities in sectors such as public health or the development of clean technologies in a way that could address common market failures. The EIT as a whole has still to prove that its existence makes a real difference. To do so, managers must monitor more closely — and demonstrate more plausibly — whether the substantial tax money spent on the EIT triggers the desired effects on innovation.

Creating commercially relevant knowledge through basic research needs incentives. But innovation is not something that technocrats (or bureaucrats) can easily order. Innovation and bureaucracy are in fact not a good match — too much of the latter is one of the reasons why the EIT has failed to meet expectations.

The audit report comes as proposals swirl for yet another European Union innovation body — one to be called the European Innovation Council. The idea might seem inappropriate at a time when top-down approaches to stimulate absent market forces have been weighed and found wanting.

But the EIT's failure is a good occasion to think about what is missing. It's a given that the EU needs to unlock its innovative potential to make its ageing societies fit for the future and create jobs for the next generation. So why are the EU's economic competitors in North America and Asia more able to transform the ideas of academic scientists and engineers into marketable goods and services?

It is not for want of good intent and trying. European universities have long ceased to be academic havens where students and staff ponder the wonders of the world in splendid isolation. Science parks, incubators and technology-transfer offices have become the rule on European campuses. Also, the European Commission's €80-billion Horizon 2020 research programme has a strong emphasis on producing applicable science in partnership with small and large companies. Other schemes — EU Finance for Innovators, Joint Technology Initiatives, European Innovation Partnerships and the EU Innovation Union — likewise intend to obtain the maximum economic return on research money. And yet the quality in question is in short supply. Why hasn't the investment and effort led to greater innovation?

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The byzantine complexity of the EU's innovation support is making it less effective than policymakers would like it to be. There are just too many programmes, too many levels, too many forms, bodies, requirements and exceptions. The bureaucratic confusion is not stifling innovation all together — the EU's graphene flagship project and countless small entrepreneurial success stories are sufficient evidence that some things do work very well. But given the EIT dilemma, Europe's leading research universities have rightly reminded policymakers that streamlining and simplifying EU innovation instruments is a better approach to stimulating the sought-after quality than adding another layer of complexity on top of it.

This does not mean that a European Innovation Council — for which the European Commission issued a call for ideas in February — would necessarily be wasted money. But such a council must seek to optimize, rather than add to, the existing portfolio of initiatives and mechanisms. Europe's paradoxical innovation bureaucracy might still benefit from a high-level advisory body comprising competent business leaders, researchers and policy experts. So, incidentally, might the floundering EIT. ■

Expect knowledge

We are gratified when a politician shows that they know about science, but they all should.

"Swans sing before they die —" said poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "'Twere no bad thing/Should certain persons die before they sing." Now, not everyone can carry a tune. Neither can everyone act any better than the average block of wood — which is why people at large seem to lend credence to singers, actors and other celebrities when they effuse on subjects that they know nothing about.

No one can doubt the prodigious acting talent of Robert De Niro, but does his turn as the young Vito Corleone in *The Godfather Part II*, or the tortured Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*, qualify him to opine on the link between vaccination and autism? Is he talking to me? I repeat: is he talking to me? (Clue for any readers bewildered by this: despite statements made by De Niro last week, there is no evidence for any link between vaccination and autism.)

Politician Sarah Palin has no acting ability, save that which might be parodied by the comedian Tina Fey, yet she has power and influence, which makes her increasingly barbed attacks on the reality of anthropogenic climate change all the more worrying. (Further guide for the perplexed: despite Palin's latest statements on the subject, also last week, yes, anthropogenic climate change is real.)

As the weekend approached and science had its head in its hands at the way it was being treated (again) by the news, salvation of a sort appeared. No less a person than Justin Trudeau, the debonair Prime Minister of Canada, offered an impromptu (and accurate) explanation of quantum computing at a press conference. In response, parts of the Internet have exploded into what can only be described as a nerdgasm. Why the eruption of reaction, one is entitled to ask? Shouldn't we expect all our elected representatives to be so conversant with the scientific issues of the day that explanations of quantum computing by any one of them should barely twitch a cat's whisker?

At this point, one might take a duster to scientist and novelist C. P. Snow's oft-cited 1959 tome *The Two Cultures* and refer wearily to the preponderance of a humanities education among the political class. Yet the most cursory scan of the news headlines shows how important science is to human well-being. Emerging diseases, energy policy, transport, conservation and, yes, climate change and vaccination — almost every sphere of government requires at least some familiarity with science. Especially given that most science funding is still disbursed by politicians on behalf of the public.

The problem is that science, if done properly, rarely comes up with the sound-bite certainties and expedient spin that politicians demand — nor the ability to say one thing while meaning something quite different. So perhaps it is not so surprising that the latest brave attempt by a politician to grapple with science involves the quantum world, where it is possible for something to be both true and false at the same time. ■

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