RESEARCH

Europe's innovation hub finally KICs off

Large networks of researchers and companies aim to develop and commercialize marketable products.

BY NATASHA GILBERT

In many ways, the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) is a classic European compromise. What started out as an effort to build an innovation powerhouse to rival the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge has been transformed by years of political wrangling into a gossamer web of academic and industry partnerships.

But some research policy-makers are pinning their hopes on the EIT as a cornerstone of the big push by the European Union (EU) to commercialize research and boost industry research and development (R&D) spending. Last week, after a long and painful gestation, the last piece of the EIT fell into place as its governing board gave the green light to a third and final Knowledge and Innovation Community (KIC).

This KIC aims to develop technologies for mitigating and adapting to climate change, and has a total budget of €360 million (US\$490 million) over four years. A vast — some would say unwieldy — network, it includes 20 core members and 68 affiliate partners, including French company EDF Energy and the City of Zurich in Switzerland. It follows previous KICs, agreed last December, on information and communication technologies, and clean energy. In all three cases, 25% of the funding comes from the EU budget and the rest from partner organizations (see 'Innovation partnership').

The EIT has been controversial ever since European Commission president José Manuel Barroso proposed the idea in 2005. Barroso imagined a centralized campus like MIT, but others argued that it would take many years for a single institution to build itself up from scratch to rival MIT. So the focus shifted to one of Europe's favourite fallbacks — a distributed network of partners.

Even this proved challenging to establish. The agreements for each of the three KICs took about a year to draft and approve. Mary Ritter, the climate KIC's chief executive and pro-rector for postgraduate and international affairs at Imperial College London, partly blames the "risk averse" nature of the European Commission, which allocates and audits EIT funding. But she also points out that the EIT has had to break new ground in establishing such large public-private networks.

The aim of the climate KIC, she says, "is to develop the most efficient means of producing and using fuel and other consumables, such as water, in a carbon neutral or negative way". The research will be carried out in five national centres across Europe, including Imperial in the United Kingdom and the Paris-Saclay R&D campus in France. The technologies developed here will then be tested and commercialized in one of the KIC's six regional innovation centres.

Some members of the European Parliament say that they will push for the EIT to receive a greater share of the EU budget in future, in part to help deliver the 'Innovation Union' agenda being promoted by Europe's research commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn to translate more of Europe's basic research into marketable products.

Katrien Maes, chief policy officer at the League of European Research Universities, based in Leuven, Belgium, applauds the EIT's goal of boosting innovation. But she complains that the EU has dictated the EIT's research agenda from the top down, rather than giving it the flexibility to set its own targets — something it needs to be truly innovative.

The future direction of the EIT will be discussed in April at a conference in Budapest, where the institute has its headquarters. There is a lot riding on the success of the first three KICs: the EIT will fund more only if these fore-runners bear fruit. ■

INNOVATION PARTNERSHIP

The European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) is supporting research networks in three major themes.

*Information and communication technology

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