European Institute of Innovation and Technology

Straight talk with... Alexander von Gabain

Although many of the world's best known drugmakers hail from Europe, historically the continent's academic institutions haven't been as adept as their US counterparts at spinning off companies. So, in 2008, the European Commission founded the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) to bring technology and ideas developed at universities to market.

The EIT was modeled after the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge—but it doesn't bring its students and researchers to a common location. Instead, EIT-funded projects are based within virtual Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) spread across the continent. So far, the institute has established three subject-specific KICs focused on climate change, sustainable energy and information technology, with a total of 75 collaborating universities, companies and other investors.

On 15 September, microbiologist Alexander von Gabain will take over from physicist and founding chairman Martin Schuurmans as head of the EIT. A professor at the Max Perutz Laboratories in Vienna and a cofounder of the Austrian biotech Intercell, von Gabain brings with him a new focus on advancing biomedical innovations at the institute. **Hannah Waters** spoke with him about how he plans to move the EIT into the biomedical arena.

In 1998, you founded the vaccine development company Intercell. What did you learn from Intercell that you'll bring to new position?

I learned by doing that innovation requires much more than the initial scientific discovery feeding the development. You have to build a strong team of experts constructively interacting with each other and jointly devoted toward the same goal of driving products forward. However, innovation only takes place if all those experts play together like a first-class soccer team. I am convinced that my

past experience will be useful to support the buildup of the EIT and its satellite KICs.

What steps are needed to transition the EIT into biomedical sciences?

First, the academic institutions involved must change their mindsets. There are sociological studies showing that many academics are hostile, particularly in Europe, to the idea that some of their students would take an idea and set up a company, rather than staying in basic research and entertaining an academic career. We have to change the mindset—that is one thing. We also have to get more money. As it looks now, the stakeholders of the EIT and the KICs are positively reviewing what we have achieved in such a short time. Once we get more money to invest, we should have an excellent chance in the next round to open KICs for life sciences.

In July, the EIT governing board put forward a request for more than a 13-fold budget increase in the second phase of the institute. How do you plan to use that cash?

The €4 billion [\$5.7 billion] the EIT requested is to gradually expand the KIC program by another seven to ten KICs over the next nine-year period, until the year 2020. We'd like to get KICs in life sciences, in nutrition, in aging and in other topics that are important. We don't want to do this at once, because we want to build quality.

What will you do if you don't get the full funding you requested?

If we only get a couple of hundred million euros, I would really wonder if this is an appropriate way to spend the time of the current governing board, including its chair, and the headquarters in Budapest. Let's say we get a compromise: we're not getting €4 billion; we're getting €3 billion. I think I could live with this. I think there's somehow a limit of investment where it would be pretty difficult to have an impact on the European innovation landscape, and I would say that I don't think we could really continue what we're doing.

Then what? Was the initial €300 million just a pilot?

I think it is fair to say that our initial budget was a pilot phase. We are, after all, investing public money in our KICs, so I think it's crucial that we can demonstrate that there is not only added value and impact emerging from our activities but, most crucially, results. If the KICs were unable to produce results, then we may be looking at an issue with the EIT concept as a whole; however, this is clearly not the case. KICs are already producing results and have even more ambitious plans for the future.

In 2008, the European Commission also partnered with the pharmaceutical industry to bring products to market through the Innovative Medicines Initiative (IMI). How is the EIT different?

[The IMI] is the typical, classical, one-dimensional arrow going from basic research with support of good science to move something forward. But what you're lacking at the Initiative is the entrepreneur. These are not really people who are taking a concept, taking an idea, taking a good publication, and saying, "I have become the owner and I am driving this forward because I would like this to move to the people."

So what will be your ultimate metric of success at the EIT?

The EIT becomes successful if we become an institution that by learning—and also sometimes failing—with the KICs gets a better understanding of how you can drive innovation forward in Europe. It may also become, this would be my vision, an institution that transmits knowledge and the skills you need to get our European institutions more entrepreneurial.