

COTER-003

Brussels, 28 May 2002

**OPINION**

of the Committee of the Regions

of 16 May 2002

on the

**Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament,**

**the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on**

**The Regional Dimension of the European Research Area**

(COM(2001) 549 final)

**The Committee of the Regions**

**HAVING REGARD TO** the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on The Regional Dimension of the European Research Area (COM(2001) 549 final),

**HAVING REGARD TO** the decision of the Commission of 3 October 2001 to consult it, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the communication,

**HAVING REGARD TO** its Bureau's decision of 12 June 2001 to instruct Commission 1 for Regional Policy, Structural Funds, Economic and Social Cohesion, Cross-border and Inter-regional Cooperation to draw up the opinion,

**HAVING REGARD TO** the draft opinion adopted by the Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy\* on 5 March 2002 (CdR 442/2001 rev. 2) (rapporteur: **Mr Müller**) (Prime Minister of the Saarland, D/EPP)

**unanimously adopted the following opinion at its 44<sup>th</sup> plenary session of 15 and 16 May 2002 (meeting of 16 May 2002):**

**The Committee of the Regions**

**Construction of a knowledge-based society in Europe**

1. welcomes the fact that the Commission envisages the regional support and innovative actions having a significant influence on the shaping of European research capacity. The Commission's intention of increasing efficiency by exploiting synergies between the Member States' research policies and of promoting cooperation with the regions is wholeheartedly welcomed. It is important to point out, however, that any existing synergies or tie-ins between research policies are derived both from the policies implemented by the Member States and by those regions which have competence in this area. As the Committee of the Regions has stated in a number of opinions, this is an important task when promoting research and innovation in Europe. The activities aimed at increased cooperation and the development of synergies in the field of research and innovation which the regions have been conducting for some time must be continued in the framework of the underlying development process.
2. continues to support the Commission's intention of using the Sixth Framework Programme to work towards the development of a European research area committed to strengthening the Community's competitiveness.
3. points out that scientific excellence must continue to be the decisive criterion in selecting projects for support (e.g. projects supported under the Sixth Framework Programme); the Structural Funds continue to have their uses in relation to less favoured regions (e.g. outlying regions) and should be used to build scientific infrastructure.
4. supports the decision on the targeting of economic development through systemic mobilisation of all resources available, but points out that it is particularly important to establish specific targets, in cooperation with the regions, in order to make the European economy competitive against the background of the growth, competitiveness and employment goals. By setting objectives, synergies will be achieved and economic strength focused, but this must not be done in such a way as to restrict the powers of the regions enshrined in the Treaty. The objectives must be specific and achievable. Goals such as "making Europe Number 1 in ten years time" are too simplistic and unsophisticated and need to be fleshed out in detail in partnership and dialogue with the regions. The actions and tasks falling to the EU on the one hand and the regions on the other must be spelt out.
5. shares the Commission's view that the European regions have very different profiles in terms of their human resources and technological capacity and are therefore likely to integrate in different ways. A uniform development model would therefore be doomed to failure. It is regrettable that the communication does not lay down or present any criteria for differentiated development models. A two-way exchange on (socio-economic) conditions in the regions would be a good thing, providing an input for policy.
6. highlights once again the Commission's statement on the "self-organising capacity of regions" as a "growth factor" with the proviso that "some general development principles" should be adhered to. It is a great pity that the communication does not spell these out, but at the same time it should be pointed out that in the past many regions have helped shape their research and innovation policy. In drawing up its research proposals the Commission should therefore respond to the regions' commitment by taking still greater account of regional interests and giving them more effective political weight.
7. would like to discuss further the idea of the establishment of a knowledge economy. The Committee would like to make it clear that knowledge alone cannot be a basis for economic innovation. Knowledge is easily accessible to all (e.g. via the Internet). Value can be added only by the application of knowledge. The important thing is therefore not so much to have a *knowledge advantage* but rather to have a lead in the *use of knowledge*. And here man's social behaviour and creativity are just as important as knowledge, and these too must be encouraged.

### **Gearing of research policy to local and regional conditions**

8. supports the objective of territorialisation, as long as this is understood to mean that at both national and European level, research initiatives and synergies are geared to take account of the socio-economic realities and specific features of the regions and their needs. The Committee would oppose it, however, in the light of subsidiarity and the regions' research responsibilities, if it were to be understood to mean research and support for research being centralised or "planned" at European level. It remains unclear how, in the process of reallocating powers between the Community, the Member States and the regions, a viable legal basis is to be established for involving the regions in the coordination of research policy. The Commission could draw up a plan to focus its regional policy on the competent levels of government. This should be combined with greater political involvement of the regions in the preparation and implementation of research activities at Community level.
9. shares the Commission's view that local responses should be coherent with an inter-regional approach but would like to suggest that the measures should be based on a joint analysis of the territory in question and jointly established objectives with significant input from the regions.
10. considers that the development and shaping of regional approaches to support for research and innovation should be consistent with the principle of regional partnership, initiative and responsibility. Regional research joint ventures and alliances should receive special financial support from the European Union. They too should be able to avail themselves of the new instruments under the sixth RTD framework programme.

### **Promotion and transfer of knowledge rather than just provision of capital**

11. doubts whether "upgrading "knowledge" and "increasing technology diffusion" will encourage regional development without the provision of capital. The promotion of knowledge transfer is an important component of research support. The communication leaves it open as to whether the Commission will make additional resources available specifically for this purpose. The regions feel that this needs to be done if the Commission's objectives are to be met. Stress should once again be placed on the decisive cluster-forming role which the regions play with regard to the training of young scientists in universities, the maintenance and development of public and private-sector research institutions and the shaping of regional research policy and conditions for SMEs.

### **Research governance in the regions**

12. stresses that some regions have already been helping to shape their own research and innovation policies. It is important that all regions are able to conduct their policy in this area responsibly in future.
13. would like to make it clear that successful research and innovation models cannot be copied at will. Only by establishing new methods and fields of research, taking account of structural conditions (although naturally also looking closely at existing successful models), will disadvantaged regions have the opportunity to share in the success of "best-practice regions". One way of doing this is to occupy niches by switching from traditional to new,

interdisciplinary fields of research.

### **Maintaining trans-regional research support**

14. agrees with the Commission that the distinct character of Community trans-regional research activities should be maintained in terms both of their specific European added-value and of their complementarity. Of particular interest are joint ventures between partners from regions with widely divergent positions.
15. advocates integration of the applicant countries of central and eastern Europe into European research support, particularly by supporting the establishment and development of inter-regional research joint ventures with the applicant countries. Such measures will promote cohesion.

### **Linking structural policy and research policy**

16. acknowledges, from the point of view of the Objective 1 and 2 regions, that the European Commission takes special account of the importance of research and development policy in less favoured regions. At the same time, however, the Committee of the Regions would like to point out that many regions are already pursuing their own research strategies and programmes – with or without active EU support – and that these are also highly relevant to a joint research and innovation policy.
17. points out that European regions are divided for the purposes of European structural policy into eligible and ineligible areas on the basis of objective indicators. In implementing structural support the EU has hitherto respected the subsidiarity principle to a great extent. The European Commission has rightly recognised that the regions are better placed than higher levels of government to monitor the development of firms and research institutions.
18. points to the outstanding importance of structural support in enabling less favoured regions to catch up. Structural support is, however, more regionally orientated than research support. In the light of this the communication should make a clear distinction between the functions of EU structural support and EU research policy; and here it should be borne in mind that not only the Objective 1 areas referred to in the communication are disadvantaged, but also Objective 2 areas undergoing a difficult process of structural change. The communication should therefore be more precise with regard to these regions, with an explicit mention of Objective 2 regions. At all events a precise analysis is needed to establish the actual causes of structural weakness, together with the resulting action tailored to individual cases.
19. advocates collaboration between the two areas of policy. The existing demarcation in terms of policy content and funding should be maintained in order to ensure transparent implementation. The proposal that potential synergies be sought is welcomed; exemplary synergies have already been achieved in some countries through the establishment of science centres.
20. advocates commitment to the outermost regions in order to support their development. These regions should of course also, in accordance with the powers assigned to them under the EC Treaty, decide freely whether, and in what way, they wish to be involved in EU research and innovation policy. The Committee feels that assigning specific research fields is not the right way to achieve the Commission's objectives.

## The role of the "innovative actions"

21. supports the Commission's efforts to establish or strengthen cooperation networks. These networks should not, however, take the form of transfers of individual researchers. In many areas they could be organised with equal effectiveness with a view to the sharing of electronic and information-technology platforms, and to an increasing extent as public-private partnerships, in this way leading to an exchange of staff or knowledge.
22. welcomes the actions proposed in the communication to improve and promote both the geographical and intersectoral mobility of researchers, in particular through the creation of mobility centres at a level close to the people and more especially at regional level. In this connection the Committee of the Regions also considers it necessary to design and network dedicated, user-friendly databases and platforms in order to promote the use of the most modern information and communication technologies in the interests of the *mobility and transfer of knowledge*. An example of this is the genomics and proteomics databases used in biotechnology which are fed with up-to-date research findings by scientists from all over the world. In this way scientists can make their discoveries available to their fellow-scientists, with physical location being largely irrelevant. Gearing specialised collaborative projects to knowledge transfer should be a further main objective of support for innovation. This would help enable scientists in different locations to work on the same subjects.
23. supports the Commission in its intention of developing support for research for and in SMEs, as well as a policy for encouraging SMEs to participate in research activities linked to the sixth framework programme. Accordingly, a special effort must be made to ensure the full participation of SMEs in the more large-scale instruments constituted by the integrated projects and networks of excellence. In this connection the CoR renews its call to the Commission to improve cooperation between the relevant DGs and between the departments dealing with SMEs and the national contact points. The participation of SMEs could be further improved by encouraging the transfer and adoption of knowledge and technologies, as well as promoting the use of research findings by establishing and funding high-performance electronic networks and making these available to research and innovation projects.
24. welcomes the Commission's intention of establishing technological strategies in partnership and dialogue with the regions. To this end the Commission could in particular provide funding to less favoured regions.
25. supports the proposed innovative actions aimed at promoting incubators for new firms, spin-offs and start-ups.
26. would like to see discussion between the competent bodies aimed at simplifying the procedure for applying for EC research support, which at present often acts as a barrier to development. It has emerged from numerous discussions with firms and universities that applications are rarely made for EC support because even if the application is approved by the Commission, the workload involved means that it is simply not worthwhile. This is particularly regrettable in the case of young, innovative firms which have to budget very carefully for the use of their staff and whose financial resources are very limited. One possible approach would be a two-stage procedure (pre-screening) – during the first of which a preliminary decision on the eligibility of a project for funding would be taken in a reasonably unbureaucratic way; this would be followed by a more detailed second stage. This would obviate the need for new facilities to deal with applications with their resultant costs.

## Measures enabling the European Research Area regional approach

27. supports the idea of the establishment and development of centres of excellence to act at regional, trans-regional and international level.
28. doubts, however, that centres of excellence will act as a brake on the inter-regional brain drain. This depends on economic and social factors as well as scientific ones and will not be stopped by this measure alone.

## Benchmarking as an objective

29. points out that the benchmarking already carried out by the Commission in certain areas – in relation to economic experts and education – often meets with scepticism and rejection. Meaningful indicators and investigative methods need to be developed, which make it possible to draw comparisons between regions and which produce worthwhile and useable results, with a view to successful EU benchmarking in the regions. The instruments need to be selected in such a way that the causes of the existing structural deficits can be pinpointed, whilst keeping the workload to acceptable proportions. It should again be stressed that less favoured regions in particular will have opportunities only if they tap new forms of innovation. Benchmarking based on experience and best practice is not very helpful for these regions, as outstanding examples (such as Martinsried) cannot be

copied. The regions must be involved in the development of appropriate methods, tailored to their environment, drawing on their experience and using comparable instruments.

Brussels, 16 May 2002.

The President

of the

Committee of the Regions

**Albert Bore**

The Secretary-General

of the

Committee of the Regions

**Vincenzo Falcone**

\* The commissions and their remits were restructured on 6 February 2002.

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