Support Systems for Innovation and Entrepreneurship

The discussions at thematic table D produced the following conclusions:

The main obstacle for European global competitiveness is the predominant fragmentation of its economic, R&D and innovation capacities and resources. In order to remove these barriers stronger leadership is required on the part of EU institutions and national politicians. The creation of European single market for services, with particular emphasis on knowledge-based services needs to be accelerated.

The education system does not comply with the fast changing socio-economic environments’ needs although students in Europe often identify having a degree with a privileged socio-economic status. In order to overcome this conflict, the curricula should be designed in view of employability of graduates, in a way that reflects specific requirements of their environment in general, and particularly in the labour market; more emphasis should be given to practical experience; students should be trained to be flexible in their career expectations and students must be prepared for lifelong learning - greater openness of universities will help facilitating this aspect. Retraining of the academic staff and their adaptation to new demands of the dynamically changing social and economic environment should be systematically encouraged. University leadership should reassure involvement of professors in research and consultancy activities related the curricula of the department. Qualified experts from business should be invited more systematically to transfer their valuable entrepreneurial experience to students. Obstacles caused by labour market regulations should be removed, allowing and encouraging staff exchanges and favouring part-time consultancy and other forms of interaction between the different sectors of business and academia. Commercial entities (spin-offs, technology transfer centres, etc.) created and owned by universities should be facilitated by legislation and supported by university leadership.

Policy makers should recognize the complexity of the partnership between business and academia. This is important for any effort to build up a knowledge-based economy, as policy areas such as education, research, innovation, and entrepreneurship have to be integrated. The strategy and policies to strengthen a knowledge-based economy requires a comprehensive approach and concerted efforts from authorities with a variety of portfolios, originating both from public and private sectors. Policy instruments have to be equally supportive, flexible and consistent, while measures taken should be calibrated in correlation with their contribution to the innovation process. Innovation and entrepreneurship are the two pillars of economic growth and competitiveness, and without stable and sufficiently pro-active support environment they cannot be achieved and sustained.

Creating a supportive business environment - targeting SMEs in particular – requires a well-conceived, realistic approach reflecting specific market conditions both at national and regional level. It has to be well structured and calibrated in order to set incentives to initiate innovation processes within the companies, and partnerships between business and academia. Any such strategy should include instruments such as entrepreneurial education and training (including LLL), professional advice and mentorship, tax and access to finance facilities, internationalization, IPR counseling, providing R&D staff secondment, performing technology and innovation audit, et cetera. Science and technology parks are one of the key instruments of business academia collaboration and should therefore be encouraged more effectively.

Regulatory differences between Member States demonstrated to be a discouragement for trans-national cooperation. In particular, harmonising rules regarding IPR ownership and royalty-sharing formulas, fostering joint ownership regimes and increasing universities’ expertise in managing the commercialisation of IPR deserves more attention. This will be particularly effective with greater opening of national research programmes. Yet, it is observed that the process of opening national research programmes is far too slow.

Cross-border collaboration and the creation of international research consortia involving both academic and business expertise should be further promoted.
Companies, particularly SMEs, could greatly benefit from researchers and academic experts joining their R&D teams. Instead of short term contractual relations, long term partnerships between business and academia should be developed by respective stakeholders, and they should stand on the solid ground of a stable political and financial environment.

The existence of a powerful venture capital market and seed capital is vital for the creation and growth of university spin-offs and other forms of business-academia collaboration and must be facilitated. Establishment of co-investment fund through public-private partnerships would also be an instrument to overcome the challenges. Present know-how indicates that co-investment funds are an effective way to leverage private sector participation to the market.