

# 'Bringing together the best in Europe'

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With the planned formation of a "European Institute of Technology" announced last week, the EU hopes to bring European innovation and knowledge back into the global picture. The institute, which is planned to be built by 2010, will aim to compete and even rival like institutes in Japan and the United States.

In the current knowledge economy, the generation and exploitation of knowledge play the main role in wealth creation. Yet Europe's share in knowledge creation has been in a steady decline for the past century, according to EU sources. The percentage of EU Nobel Prize winners has been falling, from 73 percent between 1901 and 1950 to 33 percent between 1951 and 2000. In the past decade that figure has plummeted to 19 percent between 1995 and 2005. The share of patents granted to EU companies has also declined, while those granted to U.S. companies has increased. The regions now responsible for the lion's share of knowledge-creating activities are the other two Triad countries: Japan and the United States.

The exodus of talented European scientists to these areas has also contributed to the current "brain-drain" climate. Both Japan and the USA are proving increasingly attractive to researchers, offering substantial salaries and benefits, not to mention well-equipped research facilities.

And the EU's knowledge problems don't end there. China and India are becoming increasingly competitive and rising up the world's economic rankings, providing further challenges. Figures released by the National

Bureau of Statistics at the end of last year indicated that China is now extremely close to both the United Kingdom and France in terms of economic size and produces more math, science and technology graduates than the all of Europe combined. India's economy is also booming, rising by 8 percent a year.

Yet it almost seems a contradiction to point out that the EU is certainly not short of impressive research and knowledge-creating institutions. From the Oxford and Cambridge research clusters and Nobel-prize winning Chemistry Physics research group at the University of Sussex, to the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) in Switzerland, to the dozens of other prestigious research and development centers spread out across Europe, world-class knowledge creating work is being carried out throughout the bloc.

What EU officials feel is missing is a way of bringing that knowledge out of the "Ivory tower" in an accessible format. A Public Consultation document on the EIT acknowledged that the excellent results that were being achieved in current European research and teaching were not being effectively transferred beyond the boundaries of the institutions that created them, and that co-operation with industry was not well-developed.

The EU hopes to tackle these problems head-on with the creation of the ETI. Rather than being a single campus, the ETI would consist of a network of groups drawn from the outstanding research institutes and university departments that already exist. The network would potentially be hosted across Austria, France and Poland. EU Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso had already said that the ETI was "not an attempt to re-invent the wheel." Instead of creating an entirely new institution from scratch, the network will bring together the best in Europe acting as a "pole of attraction" for talent.

Acknowledging that knowledge is not defined by geography, the ETI is also aimed at attracting the best minds, ideas and companies from around the world. Companies here will be a key part of the ETI's activities. Whilst the EU would finance some of the cost, business leaders were also expressing an interest. Microsoft and Nokia were cited by EU officials as being interested in engaging with the scheme.

The ETI aims to tackle the emerging issues of technology, economics and innovation by specializing in the areas that have the most potential for innovation. Nanotechnology will be a particular focus, as will the environmentally aware subjects of "green" energy, climate change and eco-innovation.

Although associated with many university departments through its proposed network, the EU had not yet decided whether the ETI would be able to award degrees. That decision would be made at the end of 2006, when the Commission makes the formal proposal to set it up.

In creating this collaborative institution between world-class academic and private bodies, the EU hopes to firmly place Europe back on the map as both a knowledge-creating powerhouse and a source of economic strength.

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