

Europe can take advantage of its high regional innovation potential

Written by Lambert van Nistelrooij on 5 June 2015 in Opinion
Opinion

The EU should take steps to bridge the growing innovation gap between its regions, says Lambert van Nistelrooij.



As things stand, Europe is still not innovative enough. The European innovation scoreboard for 2015 shows us a way to improve this, pointing out that there is much to be gained in the field of regional innovation.

So, at this year's week of innovative regions in Europe (Wire) conference in Riga, the focus on regional research and innovation will again be at the heart of our discussions.

There is a growing need for more innovative projects in the regions and a smooth cooperation between the regional, national and European actors involved.

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With the 2015 budget having more funds available for innovation than ever before, there will be a shift from preparing policy to the actual implementation of regional smart specialisation strategies.

However, we are still facing an increasing innovation gap between the more advanced regions and those that are less developed. The EU's mid-term review creates a perfect backdrop to this year's conference.

We must ask ourselves what will constitute our next step towards a more balanced EU with more jobs and growth in the European regions.

It is well known that advanced regions in Europe invest more public money than the lesser developed regions. There is a clear interregional innovation-gap, what we call the 'innovation paradox'.

The reason for this gap is that regional innovation systems in less developed regions are often underdeveloped and fragmented. The right framework and policy delivery systems are absent, the public sector is inefficient and there is a lack of understanding by policymakers of the regional innovation process.

A striking disconnection between the academic landscape and the regional economy reinforces this problem. To bridge this gap, the European parliament entrusts the commission with preparatory action through the 'stairway to excellence' programme.

The aim of this project is to help countries in the uptake of knowledge and innovation. After 25 years of investments by cohesion policy some countries are still lagging behind.

The most effective way for regions to move forward on this 'stairway to excellence', is further specialisation in their areas of expertise. That's where regional innovation and smart specialisation come together. EU funds now support competitive cross-border and transnational alliances and clusters.

That's why smart specialisation is one of the key factors for future growth and jobs in Europe. A lot of innovative initiatives like the automotive campus in Helmond, the Netherlands, are all set up from this strategy.

However, there are many difficulties in the cross-border cooperation. According to the innovation scoreboard, investments in the private sector are decreasing. Venture capital as a proportion of GDP is going down and the introduction of innovative products from SMEs has declined.

Wire 2015 touches on the future of the European structural and investment funds. Today, richer countries get less regional EU money in their national envelopes and have a tendency to set cohesion policy aside due to excessive bureaucracy. Poorer countries have a bigger envelope and prioritise cohesion.

That's why we have come up with a plan to combine the EU's smart specialisation strategy, the

'stairway to excellence' and the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme in the coming years.

By combining these instruments we can achieve better synergies at all stages of programming and implementation. This will allow us to reach the optimal outcome of a future for innovation, jobs and for all regions in Europe.

We will especially focus on better access to EU funds for the SMEs which form the backbone of Europe's economy. I hope the results of the Wire conference can inspire us and provide viable and visible solutions for bridging the innovation and cohesion gap.

About the author

Lambert van Nistelrooij (EPP, NL) is a member of parliament's regional development committee and a speaker at the WIRE 2015 conference

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