Building research networks through Eureka

It has no funding mechanism and no central budget, but the Eureka initiative is still proving successful, writes...

The EU’s seventh framework programme for research (FP7) gets plenty of attention, but it is not the only research game in town. Another system for organising pan-European collaborative industrial research exists in the form of the Eureka initiative.

It is a network that consists of the 27 governments of the EU and ten non-EU countries – Croatia, Serbia, Federal Republic of Macedonia, Russian Federation, Ukraine, Turkey, Iceland, Monaco, Republic of San Marino and Israel. It has no funding mechanism and there is no central budget for supporting research projects. Instead, experts help companies to develop their project proposals and to find partners in other countries and private funding.

Recent projects have resulted in a portable explosives detector for use at security checkpoints, a sensor that reduces harmful diesel engine emissions by 90% and a new technology to restore some vocal capacity to patients with cancer of the larynx. There are currently 693 projects running, each involving two or more countries.

According to Luuk Borg, head of the Eureka secretariat in Brussels, companies are still keen to launch collaborative research projects despite the current financial climate. “We expected the number of project proposals to go down. However, we have had a slight increase in the number of projects coming in,” he says. “And the number of good project proposals has also increased.”

Expert panel

Proposals are evaluated by an independent panel of experts. If endorsed by Eureka, companies apply to their member states for national funding. The Netherlands is one of the countries that prioritises Eureka projects for national programme funds. But many countries do not have this reliance on uncertain national funding and are not concerned about exactly where funding is coming from.

Luke Georgiou, professor of science and technology policy and management in the Manchester Institute of Innovation Research, says: “Funding challenges. Eureka is more exposed than the framework programme, as funding is not secured.”

Georgiou is a longstanding observer of Eureka’s market impact. Reforms to maximise its relevance and effectiveness have involved moving from smaller projects to setting up so-called clusters at the end of the 1990s – long-term collaborations with a large number of participants to develop and commercially exploit generic technologies.

“Clusters have been very successful mechanisms, which have attracted considerable resources. Industry-led and non-bureaucratic, they have formed the basis of a number of the EU’s Joint Technology Initiatives, on embedded software and nanoelectronics,” says Georgiou.

Up-front public funding

More recently, in partnership with the EU, Eureka has secured a six-year stream of public funding upfront, for high-technology...