Research and Innovation Council

With a population of just over 5 million, Finland is a small country. But Finnish science, technology and innovation rank among the world’s finest. In an enlightening discussion, Secretary General Anssi Mäkki explains the role the Council plays in optimising the impact of Finnish ingenuity on society

In what ways does the Research and Innovation Council assist the Finnish Government and its ministries in matters concerning research, technology, innovation and their utilisation and evaluation? What is the main mission of the Council?

The Council is responsible for the strategic development and coordination of Finnish science, technology and innovation (STI) policy, and the national innovation system as a whole. It is both a classical independent advisory body and a strategy-shaping multi-stakeholder institution, where political decision makers, administrators, academics and industrial experts jointly design and formulate major development lines and actions for national STI policy.

Could you describe your role and how you came to occupy this position?

The Secretary General’s task is to coordinate the work of the secretariat supporting the Council in tasks including monitoring, analysis and synthesis, and the preparation of original documents. For many years, I worked in different research and management positions at the interface between science and technology at the Finnish Meteorological Institute, and later in research funding and programme coordination at the Academy of Finland. With a personal view on what works in the Finnish innovation system, it was a natural move to apply for a position in which ensuring the system actually functions correctly is a key task.

How does the Council coordinate Government activities in the field of STI policy?

The Council does not have decision-making power over the ministries or agencies, nor do we have a budget of our own; but traditionally the Council, chaired by the Prime Minister, has had significant influence. Guidelines agreed by the Council are regularly recognised in policy documents produced by the ministries and the most important recommendations provided by the Government programme. However, priority setting between research themes or technology areas, for example, is not in the remit of the Council.

Until a few years ago, Nokia was the world leader in mobile technology, and still commands a prominent position. How important is Nokia to the Finnish research and innovation strategy?

Nokia’s position in our innovation system has indeed been very strong, but recent changes have made this role smaller. Despite this, ever since Nokia started reducing their staff in Finland, other multinational companies have opened research centres here. There is a lot of start-up activity as well. These companies have benefited from being able to recruit talented and experienced former employees of Nokia. It is thus neither the company nor its heritage that are important for our strategy, but the competence we have in ICT, and we must take advantage of – and preserve – that potential.

Do you feel the takeover of Nokia by Microsoft will have a positive impact on the technology sector in Finland?

We have to remember that Microsoft is only taking over mobile phone activities and, so far, there has been no indication that Microsoft wants to move these mobile phone activities away from Finland. Operating only the remaining parts (Nokia Systems and Networks, the digital content services and Advanced Technologies), in many estimates Nokia is now considered stronger as a company.

Of course, there are different opinions but most seem to think that the long-term impact will be positive. The dominance of one large company in a quite specific field of technology makes the economy of a small
country like Finland vulnerable, as we have seen. So although in the short term we need to make significant efforts to adjust, in the long term a more diversified ICT field is probably a positive thing.

Are there any particular national or international developments in STI that the Council has identified which you are particularly excited about?

I am very positive about the potential of regional networking and cooperation, which have been introduced in the Innovative Cities (INKA) programme of the Ministry of Employment and the Economy. In this initiative, we encourage cities, higher education and research institutes, and enterprises in major urban areas of Finland to jointly identify their strengths and competences. The purpose of this exercise is to develop competence-driven business and internationally recognised hubs of knowledge founded on these strengths. From a wider perspective, the EU’s Smart Cities initiative contains many of the same elements as our INKA programme.

Does it fall within the remit of the Council to try to ensure that Finland is an attractive prospect both for international investors and researchers? What opportunities does Finland offer foreign STI stakeholders hoping to establish themselves in the country?

Today, it is very difficult to differentiate between innovation policy on the one hand and enterprise policy on the other. The Ministry of Employment and the Economy is responsible for both of these areas in Finland, and even if the Council’s focus and mandate are centered on innovation, to some extent we need to deal with both as well. An environment which supports the development and uptake of innovations may not be very different from an environment which is attractive for enterprises and individuals.

How should Finland maintain its reputation as a world-leader in STI?

We live in an increasingly interconnected society where changes on the other side of the world very quickly have an impact on a local level. Hence, in addition to prioritising our strengths, we need to ensure we develop a sufficient level of resilience, carefully balancing the resources of a small nation. We strongly believe in the positive effects of education, research and innovation on our wellbeing, and we have invested and will continue to invest a great deal in them.

Pujiang Innovation Forum 2013

Finland was named the designated Country of Honor at the 2013 Pujiang Innovation Forum in China. Anssi Mälkki discusses what closer ties between China and Finland will mean in the future

There are many fields where we have close collaboration with China both in science and technology. Bilateral agreements have opened doors to excellent collaboration. Cooperation in the field of nanotechnology has been important both for enterprises and the research sector. As an example, the China-Finland Nano Innovation Center was opened in Suzhou Industrial Park in Jiangsu, China, in November 2012. We have also developed long-term scientific collaborations in neuroscience and climate change. Practical openings on concrete themes of mutual interest are important for creating long-term collaborations, and I think this was one of the reasons Finland was made Country of Honor in 2013.

International recognition of many of our lead enterprises has opened doors in China in the past, but it is our less well-known industries that may well benefit the most from the Forum. There are lots of opportunities in this vast market. However, in order to be interesting, we have to prove our excellence. So it is crucial to know where our competences match with Chinese needs, and aim for mutual long-term benefit.