Launched in April 2013, Vision2020 is a European networking platform that enables SMEs, universities and corporates to collaborate effectively through the Horizon 2020 EU funding programme. Here, Vision2020’s Director Abdul Rahim outlines how this initiative is facilitating the joined up work of academia, businesses and society at large.

How has your previous experience and career trajectory to date equipped you for your role as Director of Vision2020? On a personal level, what excites you about the role?

Over the last 10 years, I have been heavily involved in a number of publicly funded projects that link small and medium sized businesses to local and national government supply chains. I have also sat on the board of London Metropolitan University, which motivated me to explore how valuable collaborations between industry and universities could be launched and encouraged.

Could you briefly outline the ethos that underpins Vision2020?

Vision2020 was launched to foster business-university collaboration across Europe for organisations that wanted to tap into the EU Horizon 2020 fund for research and innovation. Essentially, the ethos behind Vision2020 is to bring together excellence-based research organisations and highly innovative SMEs so that they can form trusted consortia and collaborate together effectively. Our main goal is to facilitate this process and connect innovators across different sectors, avoiding ‘gate-keepers’ where possible.

You help leading research institutions to connect with innovative SMEs across Europe. What are the respective advantages for universities and businesses?

Businesses benefit by being able to connect with excellent institutions beyond the boundaries of their localities. This direct access to world-leading institutions and people with experience of EU funding prepares the groundwork for successful projects. As for universities, they are given the opportunity to work with cutting-edge entrepreneurs, no matter where they are based, and from identifying good-quality partners, often at very short notice. Additionally, these two-way connections help university spin-outs access and link up with markets across Europe.

On a practical level, how does Vision2020 identify common research interests between different organisations and how does it ensure that connections are formed?

We have a members-only portal where they can make calls for partnership and consortia. Vision2020 members also select specific research areas that interest them – such as Health, ICT and Energy – these groups then form ‘clusters’ within the Vision2020 platform that meet and discuss potential projects and funding calls. Moreover, Vision2020 events are a very useful way of developing relationships – and as our events are highly focused on building consortia for specific research calls, all participants concentrate on relevant and specific research themes. We do not have ‘professional networkers’ at our events.

Are there any collaborations formed as a result of Vision2020 that you would particularly like to highlight?

Many successful collaborations have been formed as a direct result of Vision2020 activity. For example, a UK-based business approached a London-based university seeking involvement in a consultancy project. The university introduced them to a Spanish research organisation that delivered the project. Several Vision2020 member institutions and businesses have submitted Horizon 2020 proposals arising from...
Vision2020 links, for which they are currently awaiting results. Our expert members have delivered free workshops to members and provide specific advice on research proposals and proposal writing.

In what way does the ‘policy hub’ contribute to advancing the aims and objectives of Vision2020?

The ‘policy hub’ meets once a year to review the Vision2020 activities of the past year and formulate the area of focus for the next 12 months. Topics for consideration include the recruitment of new members, the structure of the network, linkages with other networks, engagement with the European Commission and an analysis of the types of activities that benefit our members the most.

You run events across Europe to encourage networking between SMEs and universities on Horizon 2020 projects. Why are they so important?

Last year we ran nine events and in 2015 we have a similar number planned. Events are very important – they allow knowledge exchange between members, they help long-lasting, trusted relationships to form and they help members to focus their proposal ideas on calls for Horizon 2020. We have a number of different types of events. First, open events – which are open to Vision2020 members and local organisations – inform participants about Horizon 2020 and facilitate the networking and recruiting of new members. Second, cluster events relate to Horizon 2020 calls in a specific research area; they are normally attended by university- and industry-based researchers working in that area, enabling them to build consortia and develop proposals. Third, best practice and learning events provide a space for members to share best practice and strategies, with one of our expert members providing training that is relevant to Horizon 2020.

Vision2020 complements Horizon 2020’s focus on cross-sector, multidisciplinary collaboration. Looking forwards, how will this impact research and innovation across Europe? Will there be any tangible benefits for European citizens?

The themes are fairly broad so an innovative idea with high impact potential should fit into Horizon 2020 in most cases. Multidisciplinary collaboration in particular is yielding a lot of highly innovative activity. Just looking back over the last few years in industry developments, many innovative solutions have a wide reach and are already helping European citizens to lead better lives at lower costs. While elsewhere it may be difficult to obtain the necessary funding to explore high-risk, innovative ideas, Horizon 2020 funding supports and drives the development of these ideas that have the potential to change our lives.

CONNECT AND COLLABORATE

As the largest ever EU research and innovation programme, Horizon 2020 has €80 billion of research funding available. Running from 2014 to 2020, several of its leading participants are facilitated by the activities of Vision2020, which identifies common research themes and interests between universities and businesses.

Vision2020’s membership includes leading universities throughout Europe and many innovative SMEs. While membership to SMEs is completely open and unrestricted, universities are recruited based on their excellence and EU programme track record. At present, the future expansion of research institutions is being planned through a comprehensive process of evaluation and approval.

CASE STUDIES

• Vision2020 members Cardiff University, UK, and Leuven University, Belgium, are currently working together on a project that will lead to the development of a pan-European super-grid for sharing renewable power. Through developing energy-related research collaborations and increasing access to EU funding, the scientists anticipate that their research will deliver a single European electricity market, improve sustainable energy technology and generate jobs.

• At the beginning of 2014, Vision2020 partner University College London (UCL) was building a project for ICT 18-2014: Support the Growth of ICT Innovative Creative Industries SMEs – part B CSA. After using the Vision2020 platform to invite SMEs to join the Consortium, LEITAT Technological Center responded and is currently working alongside Proximo Technology to enhance the design and optimisation of the compressor valve.

• In February 2014, Spectrum Aerospace Research Corporation sent out a call for partners to develop low-cost sensors for space-based earth monitoring. As a result of advertising on the Vision2020 platform, a Spanish SME and two research organisations expressed their interest in forming a collaboration.

VISION2020 IN NUMBERS

• 165 members
• 110 SMEs
• 37 Research Organisations
• 30 countries represented
• 17 experts, corporate and associate partners