As European Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation, how can Europe keep its competitive edge?

The future of Europe’s competitive edge is all down to openness and diversity. One of my three priorities is open innovation. I want to involve as many different people and organisations in European research, science and innovation processes as possible. My aim is to bring companies, researchers, universities, policy makers, start-ups, civil society and citizens together, because diversity stimulates creativity while compelling us to confront new ideas and fresh perspectives. A lot of work is already being done on this through our biggest funding programme yet, Horizon 2020. Put simply, diversity leads to better research. If we want to keep our competitive edge, we have to open up within Europe, as well as invest in wider international cooperation.

Can you provide an insight into the concept of an ‘innovation union’ and describe how funding practices have changed to support this objective?

Any innovation union has to embrace the exchange of knowledge and ideas across sectors and borders. In the 21st Century, we find more and more innovation succeeding at the intersection of disciplines. Take, for example, Organs-on-Chips, which won the London Design Museum’s Design of the Year Prize. These beautiful chips push air, blood or nutrients past real human cells, simulating how our organs work – and their design is simply stunning. It’s their simplicity that gives Organs-on-Chips so much potential for pre-clinical trials, for example. We see this kind of thing happening all around us, whether we’re using digital solutions for health or robotics for driverless transport. This is why we’ve designed Horizon 2020 to support many cross-cutting initiatives for research and innovation in multidisciplinary areas, such as the circular economy or smart and sustainable cities, and opened up the programme to the world.

Three of Horizon 2020’s goals are to boost the economy, create jobs and improve lives. How is Horizon 2020 helping innovators get their ideas to market faster?

It’s no secret that we have to get better at commercialising European ideas in Europe. There is still a great deal of work to be done, but getting ideas from the lab to the market is exactly what we want to accomplish with Horizon 2020 and...
we’re approaching the issue from many different angles. One example is our SME instrument, which has around €3 billion (2014-2020) available for innovative SMEs that wish to tap into international markets. We’re also supporting access to risk finance for research and innovation projects that might find it difficult to overcome financial barriers. Horizon 2020 is always working to bridge the gap between basic and applied research, promoting world-class science, removing barriers to innovation and making it easier for the public and private sectors to work together in delivering innovation.

Could you explain how the European Commission works with industry to apply research dedicated to addressing existing challenges faced by society?

We want to deepen the relationship between the public sector and industry in working together to solve universal societal challenges. One of the ways in which we do this is through public-private partnerships and public-private initiatives. The Innovative Medicines Initiative, for example, supports collaborative research and builds networks of industrial and academic experts to boost pharmaceutical innovation. Other partnerships cover many different areas, like the European Green Vehicles Initiative and Energy-efficient Buildings and Factories of the Future. We also regularly call on industry to work with us in identifying barriers to innovation in Europe, so that we can come up with better ways of doing things for everyone.

What is the public’s role in supporting aims such as clean energy and better healthcare?

As citizens, it’s important to let the public and private sectors know what’s important to us. We can achieve this through elections, public consultations, advocacy or by changing our behaviour – for example, by reducing the consumption of unethical products, or demanding that new innovations are made widely available and affordable.

But it’s not just up to citizens. Policy makers and the scientific community need to work together to ensure that decisions made with public money, in the public interest, are based on the best possible scientific advice. This year, we’re setting our new Scientific Advice Mechanism, which will give us a stronger relationship with the wider scientific community and help us tap into the wealth of expertise that exists in EU Member States and elsewhere. The Commission already has a wealth of scientific advice, for example, via expert groups and the Joint Research Centre. But this comes down to ensuring we have the best scientific evidence in front of us wherever it comes from. Nowadays, it’s not enough to rely on your own work. We need to understand what all the evidence is telling us, where its limits are and how independent it is before we make public policy decisions.

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