WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN INNOVATION COUNCIL?

That’s a great question – one that even the EU cannot yet answer. While EU Research, Innovation and Science Commissioner Carlos Moedas states that the idea for a council devoted to innovation has been a dream for years, the so-called European Innovation Council (EIC) has only gained traction since last summer, when he started to champion its creation.

There are many ideas swimming around about what the council’s exact role would and should be, but in comments about the EIC, the Commissioner has likened it to both the US’s Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and the European Research Council (ERC), stating that EIC should do for innovation what the ERC has done for research.

WHY DOES COMMISSIONER MOEDAS THINK EUROPE NEEDS THE EUROPEAN INNOVATION COUNCIL?

In short, Commissioner Moedas fears that when it comes to turning ideas into actualities, Horizon 2020 is at best a maze of funding calls from scattered instruments that are hamstrung by constraints and knowledge gaps. Moreover, he states that many have complained that Horizon 2020 is too slow and that, in some cases, the system can be more of a hindrance than a help to innovators.

In fact, at the recently held 2016 ScienceBusiness Horizon 2020 Conference, he announced: “In Europe, for more than 15-20 years [we have been] saying that we are really good at creating knowledge but we are not able to turn that knowledge into products. I think it is time to stop with that conversation and do something about it”.

In his mind, the EIC is a tool that could do just that, and he has expressed a desire to build the EIC so that it would act as a one-stop shop for innovators. He sees it acting as a resource that helps innovators find the information they need on a range of topics – from clarity on instruments’ activities and their offerings, to finding mentors, and everything else in between. “[The EIC] is what is needed to turn our best ideas into new jobs, businesses and opportunities,” he said.

ARE THERE ANY IDEAS ABOUT HOW A EUROPEAN INNOVATION COUNCIL COULD OPERATE?

The European Association of Research and Technology Organisations (EARTO) was one of the first groups to come out and share its opinions on what an EIC should look like and how it could best operate. In fact, as early as last October, EARTO published recommendations to the European Commission to initiate discussion about the council.

EARTO’s EIC recommendations call for the council to have two main missions: to build a strong integrated innovation strategy and to counteract the fragmentation that is rampant across the EU’s numerous initiatives and instruments.

Talita Soares, Senior Policy Officer at EARTO, expands: “The overall goals of the EIC should be to make the overall EU framework more digestible for different RD&I stakeholders and to strengthen innovation performance across Europe. It could also play a role to further align policies within different Directorate-Generals (DGs). We are doing some great things in Europe, but our competitors are doing it faster – they are moving through the market faster. Europe has excellent science and research, but we are struggling to have excellent innovation – struggling to bridge the valley of death. We need to support collaboration between actors and close the gaps between instruments”.

WAIT A SECOND – DOESN’T EUROPE ALREADY HAVE A BODY THAT FOCUSES ON INNOVATION?

Yes … and no.

Europe is awash with institutes and councils – including the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) – but none of...
The EIT has been active in the landscape of EU innovation since 2008-09, and while its purpose is to reduce fragmentation across actors, sectors and countries, it does not aim to reduce fragmentation between instruments. Therefore, the EIT is not necessarily opposed to the formation of an EIC, but it has not exactly come out in favour of it either.

What it has come out in favour of is communication.

Mathea Fammels, EIT’s Head of Unit Policy and Communications, elaborates: “We very much welcome a discussion on the importance of innovation and the need to further boost Europe’s innovation capacity, and indeed to look at some of the challenges we are currently facing. There is a need to overcome some of the fragmentation in today’s European innovation landscape and a debate on how to overcome this fragmentation is very much welcome. I think we can bring in important knowledge and expertise gained over the past years here, and we are happy to contribute and share our experiences in this respect”.

WHAT DO OPPONENTS TO THE EUROPEAN INNOVATION COUNCIL THINK?

Opponents to an EIC question if a council would actually help in the way in which the Commissioner is hoping. From duplication of effort with other EU bodies (such as the EIT) to questions on how the council will be funded, many valid concerns exist.

Dr Peter Tindemans, Secretary General of EuroScience – a non-profit grassroots association of researchers in Europe – explains: “It is not clear at all how the EIC would relate to the EIT. [The EIT] works through Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs), and I think the jury is still out on whether this has been successful. So far, if you look at what the existing KICs have produced, I would say it is still in the process of being made. Instead of setting up an EIC, I would say, let’s first make a success of the EIT and then see if we need to add something”. While the relationship between the EIC and the EIT is an important matter to iron out, Tindemans’ main concerns drill down into the heart of the EIC’s purpose. He maintains that building an EIC to do for innovation what the ERC has done for research won’t work because innovation and research are just too different.

He also argues that innovators should not have the same right to public grants that researchers do and that councils should not be deciding which companies to support by funding innovation. “There is no problem with some public funding for innovation, but you need a clear picture of what your goals are – for example, like the European Space Agency, which has a clear industrial policy. If there was a clear public mission, then you can support innovation. But even then you have to be very careful,” Tindemans warns.

According to Tindemans, his hesitation stems from the fact that he sees innovation as being done by individuals in companies, not in public institutions: “The EIC would then be supporting a company, which is there for making profits. If you support one company and not another, then you are making choices as a government as to which companies should succeed and fail, and there should be a good reason to do so”.

Soares of EARTO acknowledges these concerns: “Within the idea of streamlining these instruments, the Commission should be very careful to not create a scheme where there is a single grant holder who comes out the back end”. As such, in many ways, she and Tindemans are in agreement.

However, perhaps where the pair disagrees is not necessarily about the council, but about how innovation happens. “If you follow the Commissioner’s thinking, he keeps saying that we need to support innovation through supporting groups of companies and universities. But that is not supporting innovation. That is doing something in the stage before you get to the point where innovation starts,” Tindemans states.

Soares, on the other hand, sees innovation happening in what Tindemans calls the ‘stage before’: “We believe that innovation is about collaborations within ecosystems and value chains – this is not going to be supported by single-actor types of instruments. We talk about open innovation – building upon strengths of each other and finding success. What the EIC should be doing is looking at the innovation ecosystems – universities, RTOs, industries, regions, financers – and directing them together”.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE EUROPEAN INNOVATION COUNCIL?

If you have your own thoughts about the EIC and you want to share them, now is your time. Commissioner Moedas is seeking public comments on the idea to create the EIC, and as such the European Commission launched the Designing a European Innovation Council: Call for Ideas survey. Send your thoughts along before it closes on 29 April 2016: https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/eic_ideas