

Workshop 5: Eco-innovation: Sustainable Solutions?

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With the current global economic downturn, certain fears persist that Europe may cut back on funding of research and development as part of an overall fiscal response. This workshop addressed the importance of maintaining innovation in the EU, maintaining the move to a knowledge-based economy, and securing a competitive advantage for the future.

“In Europe, we talk a lot about R&D”, maintained Patricia Ceysens, Minister for Economy, Enterprise, Science, Innovation and Foreign Trade of Flanders, “but what we should do is ask how can we think about how we can put it into entrepreneurship”.

For Ceysens, getting innovation out of the universities on into the business economy should remain a top priority for Europe, where a well-considered economic plan should go hand-in-hand with a well developed ecological plan, or, as she puts it: “energy as usual is not an option”.

Three key areas must be addressed if R&D is to be translated into economic policy: Entrepreneurship, where conditions must be made attractive for venture capital, innovation, where, for example, eco-companies can explore the potential offered by the diversification of energy sources, and internationalism, where Europe can compete on the global stage.

Following on, the need for the easier migration of university graduates across borders was taken up by Paolo Carmassi, President of EMEA Honeywell. Social innovation and changes, he said, are as much a feature of our global marketplace as technological changes. The financial crisis, he added, may even accelerate the impetus for change.

“Europe attracts about 85% in unskilled labour, with about 5% of skilled labour”, he said. “A lot needs to be done to attract and retain graduates, For example, the talent and recognition of degrees, doesn’t travel well across borders, even in the EU”.

Taking up this point, Chis Dediccoat, President of European Markets at CISCO, agreed that the current crisis offered a “tremendous opportunity for innovation”, but added that other areas of the world will also be thinking the same, leaving the EU with no room for complacency.

Public policy, combined with the right regulatory framework, can help stimulate innovation, added Sir Stephen Gomersall, CEO of Hitachi Europe, who stressed that companies themselves are a potential source of innovation. Addressing the issue of harbouring graduate employees, he noted that while there may be a “shortage of engineers, the greatest wellsprings of innovation are the companies themselves”.

The economists of the future who look back over this time will not just see an economic crisis, said Feike Sijbesma, Chairman of the Board of Royal DSM, but also an energy, climate and food crisis. It is our task to address them, he maintained; Europe needs to invest in life and material sciences. “Governments should allocate cash in the right way. We cannot make the environment simply a derivative of global trade”

Dealing with just one crisis, admitted Commissioner for Science and Research, Janez Potecnik, who said that crises of energy, drinking water, nutrition and security refuse to subside and still need attention.

Political leadership, global governance, achieving the right market conditions, and the development of new technologies, can help the EU maintain its goal of a knowledge-based economy.

In today’s economic and environmental climate, he said, the EU has “no choice” but to pursue eco-innovation