

Little-Irelanders make way for the EU science community

Aidan Kane *

Sunday Business Post 15th September 2002

The EU will soon launch one of its most important policy initiatives, but one that has received little public attention in Ireland. It is the latest in a series of funding programmes to support research and development in Europe, known in the jargon as the Sixth Framework Programme. The total budget will be €17.5 billion from now until 2006.

Through this fund, the EU will support research across the range of scientific endeavour, and encourage cooperation across borders between universities, research institutes and industry.

Preparatory work has been underway for a number of years, as policymakers drew on experiences in previous funding rounds, including some 11,500 submissions made by European researchers to influence the design of the programme.

It is a remarkable initiative, significantly bigger than previous rounds, and directed towards the goal, endorsed by European leaders, of creating a dynamic knowledge-based European society.

This funding programme is of potentially enormous significance to Ireland: in respect of the policy effort to embed and sustain high value-added activity and jobs, and because it exemplifies the benefits afforded by enlargement of the union, to us and to applicant countries.

Ireland's positive record of participation in these EU programmes is not

*Department of Economics, NUI Galway.

widely appreciated. It is all the more impressive because these funds are quite separate from the more familiar structural and cohesion funds.

Irish researchers, in industry, academia and the public sector agencies, have succeeded in bidding for research funding in open, merit-based competitions.

The Forfás agency has published a consultants' report evaluating Irish participation in a previous round, the Fourth Framework Programme, which ran between 1994 and 1998. Irish involvement embraced private firms, third-level researchers, state research organisations and semi-state companies, and attracted about €200 million of EU funding. A total of 467 Irish organisations, including 270 Irish-owned firms, took part in over 1,100 projects in the Fourth Framework. This was an impressive performance, disproportionate to the size of the research base in Ireland at the time.

This funding played a vital role in ensuring the very existence of a scientific research capacity in Ireland. At the time, the level of state support for research and development was derisory (only about €6 million a year, in total, for basic research).

Irish policymakers have recently recognised the importance of scientific and technological research, in sustaining long-run increases in living standards.

That we have a base upon which to build is in large part due to the EU, and to the initiative of Irish researchers taking advantage of the opportunities it afforded us.

The new Sixth Framework Programme is open to organisations in those countries seeking membership of the EU. This is not a matter of a 'concession', to be grudgingly given to applicant countries: it is a matter of mutual benefit for all concerned.

It reflects the fact that scientific knowledge, and the problems that technology solves, do not recognise national borders. Participation for these countries is a vital component of their preparations for accession, as the applicant countries will be enthusiastic partners in the construction of a more innovative and knowledge-based Europe.

These funding programmes place great emphasis on the importance of cooperation between researchers in different European countries. They demand that researchers construct networks of the scale and quality that world-class research demands.

Science and technology increasingly proceed by constructing such networks, cutting across traditional disciplinary boundaries, and drawing up the diversity of expertise available in large teams.

Enlargement will be the capstone on this endeavour. It removes many national barriers to the mobility of researchers, who will then be able to contribute fully to the creation of what has been termed a 'European Research Area'.

Increasing the mobility of highly skilled workers is of enormous concern to the Irish scientific and technological community. It rightly informs Ireland's stance that freedom of movement for new EU citizens should begin from day one of accession.

There is a broader issue of rights here: the right of applicant countries to exercise their roles as full members of the European scientific and technological community.

Their claims are underscored by the enormous historical contribution made, especially by scientists from central and eastern Europe, and the scientific capacity still extant, which even the Communist regimes could not entirely extinguish.

A small symbol of this is the fact that one of the EU's key measures for funding researchers across Europe is named after Marie Curie, one of the most famous daughters of Poland, and of science.

Some opponents of enlargement seem to think that the European inheritance is theirs to withhold or grant at whim, in line with their misguided, ugly and little-Irelander affectations.

They are entirely ignorant of the centrality of applicant countries to the broader stream of European civilisation, including the scientific and intellectual patrimony that flourished long before this country could bear to face the outside world. At present, the United States is the dominant world economic and technological power.

Instead of bemoaning that fact, Europe can learn from the dynamism and energy of a society that has more than any other, opened itself to the talent of the world.

In the last century Europe was consumed with crazy ideology and war; in

the haven of the United States a vast wave of the most brilliant emigrés of central and eastern Europe sought and found refuge, and contributed their energies in full measure.

It serves us ill to cavil at the primacy of American innovation, if we deny ourselves the political instruments to emulate that success.

One of those instruments is enlargement, not merely of an economic or fiscal polity, but of an intellectual space to which our fellow Europeans have a compelling claim.

http://www.aidankane.net/writingsetc/2002_kane_eu_science.html