The Science & Innovation Scene – Latest Developments and Opportunities in Italy

BACKGROUND

As everyone knows, Italy is a beautiful country. Over the centuries, some of the most celebrated “brains” of all times were Italians: from da Vinci to Marconi. But over recent years, Italy has lagged behind more advanced European and world competitors in innovation. Longstanding weaknesses such as a lack of strategic forward planning, inefficient use of resources and the resulting brain drain have not helped.

However, even in the current climate of economic constraints, Italy has made significant strides towards improving its R&D sector and has maintained total R&D expenditure as a share of Italy’s GDP (from 1.26% in 2009 to 1.25% in 2011, compared to 1.76% in the UK).

R&D INITIATIVES

In 2012, under former Prime Minister Monti and his Research Minister Francesco Profumo, the Italian government focused on implementing a process of fiscal consolidation and reform where innovation plays a crucial role for boosting competitiveness and long-term sustainable growth. Minister Maria Chiara Carrozza, who took over from Profumo in the new government in April 2013, is determined to continue along the same route. In meetings, she has made clear that “resources allocated to science and innovation should not be considered a cost but as an investment for the benefit of society and essential in tackling emerging global challenges”.

The new government’s most recent measures concentrate on a mixture of budget cuts and streamlining research funds. The overall framework is still oriented towards direct grants and loans, but there is a move to shift some of this indirect financing towards encouraging demand-driven innovation in key research areas. Focus has been on the decline of ordinary non-competitive funds, a higher degree of integration with European R&D and Horizon 2020 priorities, and a simplification of the funding programmes.

For the first time, an evaluation exercise of Italian universities was carried out by the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University System and Research (ANVUR): ANVUR data will be used by Italy’s education and research ministry to award about €540 million (£464.5 million) in ‘prize funds’, part of the government’s 2013 university budget. The ANVUR rankings may also end up playing a part in a continuing debate on the possibility of merging some institutes to save costs.

On the public administration side, the recently created Agency for the Digital Agenda (ADA) will manage funds for large R&D projects based on ICT development and implement national digitalisation policies. Locally, regions are increasingly involved in initiatives for promoting innovative business
and fostering private-sector R&D investment. In addition, top-down initiatives such as ‘Smart Cities’, a major investment programme worth 1 billion Euros (£800 million) launched by the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR) in 2012, are encouraging all regions towards smart innovation.

To identify best practice and opportunities for collaboration in solving technological challenges in this area, in February 2014 SIN Italy will organise a mission of UK experts to Italy.

... new measures have also been introduced ...

To strengthen the alliance between different R&D systems, interesting new measures have also been introduced. For example, Minister Carrozza recently created the Challenge Prizes, an initiative modelled on Prime Minister David Cameron’s Challenges. The outcomes will be presented at Expo 2015 in Milan and a web portal will be used to catalyse partnerships between companies, charities and universities to develop innovative solutions to issues ranging from cultural heritage conservation to waste management.

INDUSTRIAL R&D

But how is industrial research being tackled today? Current policy mainly increases support for new R&D-oriented companies, large collaborative programmes and, more recently, demand-driven innovation. Business R&D investment, which accounts for more than half of the total R&D investments, increased from 0.61% of GDP in 2009 to 0.67% in 2011, still behind the 1.07% of the UK. The reform of company incentives signals a move towards indirect incentives and a focus on SMEs which are at the heart of Italian industry. Despite the relatively low private R&D investment, Italy ranks second in Europe after Germany in terms of innovative SMEs. Together with UKTI, SIN Italy organises opportunities for building new links with all the UK Catapults and the Knowledge Transfer Networks in some of the sectors which both countries consider key to the national economy.

... many international large-scale infrastructure projects ...

ITALY AS A PARTNER

Despite the limited financial resources and the scarcity of national coordinated large scale initiatives, Italian researchers have the highest productivity in Europe, and Italy ranks fourth, after UK, Germany and France, in terms of EU funding received.

Italy is also an important partner in many international large-scale infrastructure projects and coordinates the European Multidisciplinary Seafloor and Water Column Observatory and the European Plate Observing System.

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To encourage innovation through new models of collaboration between business and academia, in 2013 MIUR set aside €350M (£300M) for the creation of national thematic clusters in advanced manufacturing, green chemistry, life sciences, intelligent transport systems, agrifood, aerospace, smart communities and intelligent ambient assisted living. SIN is already exploring links with both the UK Catapults and the Knowledge Transfer Networks in some of the sectors which both countries consider key to the national economy.

... new models of collaboration ...

Prize, will highlight the most interesting new technologies being developed in Italy in the eight areas crucial to UK growth.

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Besides Smart Cities, this year SIN Italy’s focus will be on space, bringing to Hanwell the Italian Space Agency and Italian companies to discuss policy and future collaborations.

Things are definitely moving ahead in the right direction and the SIN Italy Team is actively working to showcase the UK approach to innovation, creating useful opportunities for cooperation and exchange, linking up with the Italian Minister and senior officials, and making sure that the right enabling environment for research is created for the next Leonardo da Vinci...

SIN Italy Team is present at the British Embassy in Rome and at the British Consulate General in Milan and fosters strategic collaboration in science and innovation between Italy and the UK in a wide range of sectors. If you would like to know more about how we can help please contact us at:

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