

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE NETHERLANDS?

Interview with Wilbert Schaap

by CHRIS HORGAN

In each ARTEMIS-IA magazine we highlight what is happening in the member states. In this edition it is the turn of the Netherlands, chosen to host the Digital Innovation Forum 2017.

Wilbert Schaap, is programme coordinator at the Directorate for Enterprise and Innovation at the Ministry of Economic Affairs. The Ministry promotes the Netherlands as a country of enterprise with a strong international competitive position and an eye for sustainability. The Ministry is committed to creating an excellent entrepreneurial business climate, by generating the right conditions and giving entrepreneurs room to innovate and grow. Here he brings us up to date.

TOP OF THE CLASS

In June 2016, the global innovation 2015 index was published and it featured the Netherlands behind Switzerland, the UK and Sweden but ahead of the United States as the fourth most innovative country in the world. And in the most recent World Economic Forum index, we are number four (after Switzerland, Singapore and the United States), so top dog in the European Union stakes. So why is this? "It's not only because of our very good R&D and innovation, but also with regard to our digital infrastructure, human capital, our markets and regulatory environment," Wilbert explains. "All these interrelated aspects converge to produce a very pleasing picture. Our own CBS (Central Bureau for Statistics) released just recently the latest figures on R&D in the Netherlands and reveals that we are doing better than last year, with 2.01% of our GNP (Gross National Product) devoted to R&D investment (almost 13 billion euros annually). The share of spending by companies is also increasing. It is around half of all R&D spent. But the Ministry still feels there is room for improvement here, because our aim is to get the R&D investment figure up to 2.5% by 2020. It is going to be a

tough task, but we came from 1.9% in 2011, so the good news is that it is still going up."

TOP SECTOR SUPPORT

And why is that? "I think much is attributable to the Top Sector policy that we have here, nine sectors in which we excel worldwide, such as water, logistics, creative design and high-tech systems and materials. One of the goals of this policy is to ensure that universities, knowledge institutions, RTOs, companies and government cooperate very closely on innovation, trade/export and human capital – having the right people with the right skills in the right places. In terms of innovation, we have common research agendas, which are similar to the ECSEL-JU research agendas, and very clear targets – we want to get total corporate R&D investment up to five billion euros by 2025. We are heading in the right direction."

Looking at the cooperation, how important is it to work together not only nationally but also internationally? "We are the smallest of the large countries or the largest of the small countries – it depends on your perspective. Our annual budget for support for such cooperation is 40 million euros – split 50-50 for the EUREKA cluster programmes ITEA3 and PENTA and ECSEL – and this amount is purely for international R&D cooperation. It makes sense to invest in this, because if you can pool your resources beyond borders, it can mean a significant gain in efficiency and effectiveness. This means that your research can go deeper and wider as well as cheaper."

COLLABORATION IS KEY

ARTEMIS-IA is part of a very diverse landscape of innovative initiatives, funding schemes and support systems. This landscape has changed over the years from ARTEMIS-JU to ECSEL-JU, with ARTEMIS-IA focusing on Embedded Intelligence. "The role played by ARTEMIS-IA is an important one, because it facilitates European-wide cooperation. I think this will remain the case," Wilbert says. "Of course, politics change – we have elections this coming March – but the general view is that the Top Sectors policy is working and that the need for international cooperation will continue." The Netherlands is well known as a nation that functions on consensus – the polder model. "Quite so. Collaboration is key. Centuries ago we already understood that only by working together can we build the dikes that keep the water out! What is interesting to see is the growing trend of industry researchers that also teach at universities, bringing their very practical experience to the educational context. Such collaboration is a good way forward in bringing the fundamental and applied technology worlds together. And, of course, we have this collaborative environment at the High Tech Campus (HTC) in Eindhoven, also regarded as the world's most intelligent square kilometre. So it is no surprise that ARTEMIS-IA should have its office at the heart of this open research and innovation environment, where collaboration really does take place in practice on a day-to-day basis. It is in the DNA of the companies and organisations located there. Every time I visit the HTC, I see more and more companies springing up out of the ground, like shoots in a very fertile field of R&D. With such initiatives, as I suggested, we are certainly heading in the right direction."