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TECHNOLOGY: Cooperation between universities and businesses is still rising fast

The success of the Community's COMETT programme is being confirmed.

The programme of cooperation between universities and business and industry, COMETT+, launched by the European Commission at the beginning of the year, is well on the way to becoming a runaway success. The Commission has received 568 applications, representing nearly 1,500 projects, for the second series of COMETT training projects. The Commission has been very favourably impressed, in fact, after its initial examination of the new applications, the European Commissioner responsible for education and social affairs, Manuel Marín, told a specialist committee of the European Parliament.

Mr Marín thought it very encouraging that nearly 20 projects should have been submitted by confederations of trade unions associated with universities. This type of project aims at providing trade unionists with a solid background on the management of new technologies in firms. It will be recalled that employers organizations and trade unions at the level of the 12-nation European Community have already begun, with the encouragement of the European Commission, to work together for a consensus on the introduction of new technologies and their consequences for workers.

COMETT should make it possible for students, teachers and specialists in industry to undergo training in another EC country than their own. The programme also provides for the creation of a European collaborative network between universities and firms specialised in providing training for the new technologies.

Unhappily for it, the European Commission has a budget of only ECU 8m.* at best to cofinance the second series of COMETT projects, while the applicant organizations are seeking ECU 120m. in all. The Commission should complete the task of selecting projects next month. Be that as it may, Mr Marín feels that the 12-nation Community will have to devote more financial resources to this type of activity in future.

During the selection of the first series of projects, in July 1987, the European Commission had already been obliged to reject a number of interesting projects because of a lack of funds.

+ COMETT: Community Action Programme in Education and Training for Technology

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.70 or IR£ 0.78

TECHNOLOGY: Traditional industries get a shot in the arm

Results as well as new projects for the Community's R&D programme, BRITE.

Textiles and shipbuilding are only two of the European Community's traditional industries which will be able to modernize more quickly, thanks to the 112 projects that have just been selected for the Community's programme of Basic Research in Industrial Technologies (BRITE). The first projects, launched in 1985, have already led to some remarkable results. The European Commission has now selected a further series of projects, which will receive a total of ECU 105m.* from the EC budget.

BRITE aims above all at providing Europe's traditional industries with new manufacturing technologies and new materials, so as to help them become more competitive in the sectors in which Asian and Latin American competition is making itself felt strongly. Projects accepted for BRITE are jointly financed by the EC and the firms, universities and research centres taking part in them, with the Community providing up to half the necessary funds. The industrial application of the results remains industry's responsibility.

The first series of projects resulted in an automatic garment assembly system, the prototype for an automatic welding machine for shipyards and a method of water purification, which is to be tested shortly at water-works in the Paris region.

But BRITE has also shown that specialists from different countries and economic sectors can work together. Its ground rules require that each research project involve at least two partners from two EC countries.

The European Commission received no fewer than 471 projects for the second series; for budgetary reasons only 112 of them could be selected for cofinancing. They involve 473 participants, 60% of them industrial firms. Research institutes and universities account for 25% and 16% respectively of the total.

More than 40% of the firms are small and medium-sized, as against only 30% in 1985. The European Commission has encouraged large firms to team up with smaller ones by showing a preference for projects involving small and medium-sized enterprises also.

One of the new projects is for a prototype unmanned knitting plant, while another should make it possible to apply several layers of paint at one time.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.70 or IR£ 0.78

RESEARCH: The Twelve agree to prepare for the future

Community research ministers approve a framework programme for 1987-91.

European scientists can now walk with a lighter step. The European Community's 12 research ministers officially approved the 1987-91 framework programme covering all forms of Community research, from the fight against AIDS to research in electronics and thermonuclear energy. The ministers also approved three specialized programmes, regarded as the most urgent by the Community authorities.

The ECU 6.5 billion* framework programme in fact covers a series of programmes, each of which is devoted to a given theme or sector. The most costly and ambitious of these programmes are a follow-up, in fact, to work already begun.

Thus the second stage of the ESPRIT programme, which covers information technologies, is expected to cost some ECU 3.2 billion. Half the money will come from the Community budget, the other half from those taking part in it. The other major programmes envisaged by the ministers seek to harness the 21st century nuclear power through the Joint European Torus, or JET; prepare the telecommunications network of the 1990s through the follow-up to the RACE programme, and ensure the maximum safety of persons living in the vicinity of nuclear power stations, which is the aim of the Community programme on radiation protection.

The ministers, who approved the framework programme unanimously, according to the rules of the European "Constitution", must now approve each of the specialized programmes, this time on the basis of majority voting. They have already approved three of them, although formal approval will have to await the opinion of the European Parliament.

The ministers said YES to an ECU 65m. 5-year programme of medical research. The sum is very modest, however, in relation to the ECU 1.5 billion which the Twelve will spend in this sector at the national level. The programme aims especially at coordinating the research in cancer and AIDS which is being conducted in each of the member states.

The ministers also approved the programme for helping research in developing countries, where AIDS is a priority area for research. Finally, the ministers gave their backing to the follow-up to the work being done in RACE.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.70 or IR£ 0.78

RESEARCH: Head hunters

The European Commission wants to stop the brain drain.

Some 6,800 European scientists left to work in the United States between 1982 and 1985. 9% of scientific and technical workers in American industry were from European Community countries in 1985. A brain drain on this scale puts the very future of European scientific research and technology at risk.

The head hunters task is made easier by the fact that some two-thirds of European scientists within worthwhile research projects have been unable to obtain backing from the Community because of a shortage of funds. Meanwhile the overseas challenge to Europe, especially from the United States, is backed by often substantial resources.

The European Commission is therefore asking the Twelve to make a major effort between now and 1992 to give European scientists the means which will allow them to work together, across national frontiers, on new problems. The first step in this direction was taken in 1983, in fact, with an experimental programme, which was followed up by an ECU 60m.* action programme covering the period 1985-88.

By the end of this year some 3,000 European scientists will be taking part in Community research projects. One of the most advanced among them concerns a prototype optical microcomputer, which is being developed by a multidisciplinary, multinational team under the direction of the University of Edinburgh.

The European Commission's new programme provides for another ECU 167m. of financial aid. This should make it possible to increase the number of scientists engaged on Community projects to 7,000 or 8,000 by 1992.

The means envisaged under this new programme, simply called SCIENCE, include scholarships, research funding, training courses, the "twinning" of laboratories, operational contracts as well as measures which encourage scientists to be more mobile. This should foster exchanges between scientists and the diffusion of the results of their work; it should also enable scientists, especially younger ones, to take part in research programmes in advanced sectors in other Community countries.

The priority sectors, because of their multidisciplinary nature, include mathematics, physics, chemistry, etc. The hope is to provide Europe, in the years ahead, with a collaborative network involving 5% of European scientists, as against 0.6% at present.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.70 or IR£ 0.78

TRADE: A world merchandise code for 1 January 1988

The 12-nation Community adopted it officially on 22 September.

From January 1 customs officials, ministers and traders in most countries of the world will use the same terms, or rather same numbers, to designate a given product, whether it be frozen fish or motor car parts. Now that the European Community has officially adopted the International Convention on the Harmonized System (HS) for the classification of goods, the conditions needed for it to come into effect on 1 January 1988 have been met.

The HS is a revised version of the Brussels tariff nomenclature, currently in use in the European Community. It was drawn up by the Customs Cooperation Council (CCC), an international organization to which over 100 countries belong, including all the major trading nations of the world.

On 22 September, at the CCC's headquarters in Brussels, the European Community adopted the HS at the same time as most of its member states and the countries belonging to the European Free Trade Association. Twenty-five countries in all have now accepted the HS, although only 17 are needed to ensure its entry into force on 1 January 1988.

The HS will make it easier to compare trade statistics, which in turn will make it easier to conduct trade negotiations. This clearly is of interest to the European Community, the world's largest trading entity.

SOCIAL: Flags of convenience mean fewer jobs

Shipowners, trade unions and the European Commission are looking for solutions.

The European Community's merchant fleet today employs only 150,000 people, a sharp drop from the 400,000 it employed in the early 1980s. This fall is largely due to the greater recourse to flags of convenience, as was underlined by the European Transport Commissioner, Stanley Clinton Davis, when he addressed the ILO Conference in Geneva on September 25. Once ships belonging to one or other Community member state are transferred to the Panamanian or Liberian shipping register their crew members are no longer protected by "European" social legislation.

Mr Davis believes that Community action in the field of maritime transport should put greater emphasis hereafter on its social aspects. He announced that the organizations representing shipowners and seafarers had set up a joint committee to deal with the problems relating to their profession from next month.

TRANSPORT: Watching the trains zip past

The European Parliament backs a European network of high speed trains.

If it were up to the European Parliament, the European network of high speed trains would be running already. Paris to Cologne in two and a quarter hours, Amsterdam to Frankfurt and Milan to Lyon in just over three hours, and from one end of the European Community (Copenhagen) to almost the other (Madrid) in a day ... Too good to be true!

The European Parliament adopted, by 256 votes to 8, with 25 abstentions, the report of Mr Giovanni Starita in September, while the European Transport Commissioner, Stanley Clinton Davis, expressed the European Commission's agreement with the draft resolution. He insisted, moreover, on the need for adequate financing of railway research.

The problem, and Mr Davis highlighted it, is that the modernization of European railway lines, although essential to the linking of the Community's regions and for its economic development, requires very large amounts of public funds.

The technical report which the European Commission sent to the EC Council of Ministers a year ago, entitled "Towards a European network of high speed trains", notes that the efforts by individual countries to establish such links can only be welcomed, provided they lead to the creation of a Community-wide network.

The member states must therefore notify the Commission of their projects and the Council must declare itself, so that the Commission can back such projects financially. Only in these conditions can the Commission succeed in its search for solutions to the numerous economic, technical and financial problems the creation of a European network poses.

The noise made by this modern juggernaut, running flat out at 165 miles an hour, is a matter of concern to a Belgian Euro-MP, Mr Roelants du Vivier. The Commission has studied the problem, which does not appear to be especially serious. Measured in decibels, the noise is not greater than that made by today's fast trains (93); at a distance of 50 yards it is even less (65 as compared to 68). Nor are high speed trains noisier when compared to other trains. What is more, noise levels can be reduced through track design, layout and maintenance. In any case, the high speed trains running today generally stay clear of urban centres and, on occasion, even the cities they serve.

ENVIRONMENT: Dioxin - lurking in the ashes?

European Commission to propose a directive on waste incineration plants.

The European Commission is studying the problem of air pollution from waste incineration plants, and will submit a proposal for a Directive to the European Community Council of Ministers and European Parliament early next year. An exchange of information is already taking place and should enable it to collect all available information on the nature and composition of flue gases.

The matter was raised by a Belgian Euro-MP, Mr Roelants du Vivier, who asked the European Commission what progress it had made on Parliament's request for a report on the legal rules, in the different EC member states, governing the monitoring of gases from waste incineration plants.

The Environment Commissioner, Stanley Clinton Davis, noted that the Commission's general approach was to specify the combustion and secondary combustion conditions suited to preventing the formation of organic micro-pollutants and destroying all traces of them. The fact is that it is not possible, on the basis of current knowledge, to fix "safe" emission limits from the health and environmental standpoints.

The Directive will seek, therefore, to specify what is the best available technology for preventing air pollution from new incinerator plants and lay down the criteria for gradually adapting existing plants.

ENVIRONMENT: Water protection

A week-long campaign to arouse public opinion.

Europeans tend to take the quality of water for granted - until a disaster such as the accidental pollution of the Rhine by the Swiss firm Sandoz shattered their complacency.

But as "accidents" only happen to others, and people have short memories, the International Union of Local Authorities has organised a European Water Management Week in the framework of the European Year of the Environment.

Aimed at the general public, the Week featured three main aspects of water management: the combatting of pollution, quality control and the rational use of resources.

One of the highlights of the Week was the opening to the general public, on September 26, of some 300 water treatment plants in all the European Community countries. Visitors could see how the plants function and familiarize themselves with the problems - all of which should enable everyone to contribute to the protection of water quality.

While the gradual pollution of surface and ground waters has not yet reached dramatic proportions, the problem nevertheless places a heavy responsibility on the national and local authorities, who have the task of applying the strict standards laid down at Community level.

HEALTH: Drugs in offices

Correcting typing mistakes is not the only use "Tipp-Ex" can be put to.

Medical authorities responsible for privately-run schools in northern Belgium have recommended that a product used to correct typing mistakes, and known as "Tipp-Ex", be banned from schools, according to a report which appeared in the Belgian newspaper, Le Peuple, on 23 February 1987. The thinner which it contains could cause cerebral lesions if sniffed, the newspaper reported.

A concerned Belgian Euro-MP, Ernest Glinne, brought the problem to the attention of the European Commission. The latter has now confirmed that one of the solvents used in "Tipp-Ex" is 1,1,1-Trichloroethane, classified by the European Community as a toxic substance.

The product in question is subject, therefore, to Community rules on the classification, packaging and labelling of dangerous substances, rules which the manufacturers of "Tipp-Ex" have observed in the labelling of their product.

The Commission is well aware that such products can be misused - sniffed, for example. But it is among the most difficult battles currently being waged in the war against drug abuse, given the number of such products and the impossibility of banning their sale. It is also difficult to estimate the size of the problem and advise on the measures to be taken, in the Commission's view.