

Policies > Information society > Education & research

Together at the cutting edge

By Barbara Balfour

24.07.2008

The EU has learnt that international co-operation pays dividends with research and development

International co-operation is vital for the EU to sustain its leading role in global research and development. And it is now an integral part of EU research policy, says European Commission spokesperson Catherine Ray. European competitiveness is to be supported through strategic partnerships with non-EU countries and their scientists.

Connecting European universities, research institutions and firms with their partners in countries outside Europe is intended to enhance knowledge and scientific excellence, and to address climate change, energy scarcity and other global challenges on the basis of mutual benefit.

“Working together in research to address common challenges will help to increase EU competitiveness, stimulate innovation and enhance the EU’s position on the global scene,” says Ray. Common interest, rather than competition, is emphasised in the initial stages of research where countries can share costs of building large-scale infrastructure that would not otherwise be affordable. The same applies to collaborating on results.

Collaboration often takes the form of agreements. Co-operation agreements have been put in place with 16 countries, encouraging researchers to establish dialogue, to network and to develop joint initiatives. The most recent was signed with New Zealand on 16 July. Association agreements allow for deeper ties with selected countries. They have been signed with 11 nations, most recently with Montenegro and Albania. As beneficiaries of the EU research framework programmes on the same level as EU member states, these countries share rights and duties as well as financial contributions.

The ORIENT project, jointly funded by the EU and China, links the Commission’s Joint Research Centre with researchers leading relief work in China after the May earthquake. High-resolution satellite images identify the earthquake’s impact and aid post-disaster reconstruction, enabling European and Chinese researchers to collaborate in real time. The project is run by DANTE, a non-profit organisation that operates EU-funded international research networks around the world.

Another example of an international collaboration is the ITER nuclear fusion reactor being

built in Cadarache, in the south of France, which aims to produce electricity in a safe and environmentally friendly way via fusion power. It involves the EU, Japan, China, India, Korea, Russia and the US, and will cost €5 billion over ten years to build and another €5 billion for the 20-year operation period.