Realising the full potential of innovation voucher programs

The Riga Declaration
approved 17-09-2010 at the Baltic Dynamics

The Riga Declaration proposes general guidelines for the design of Innovation Voucher Programs by Member States and regions in order to fully realise the potential of these micro-grant schemes for SMEs’ diverse innovation activities. It encourages the EC to develop a voluntary collaboration framework and knowledge brokerage system that facilities access to excellent innovation support across Europe.

The Riga declaration is the outcome of cooperation between the Europe INNOVA platform and managers of innovation voucher programs in the Member States and regions.
Riga declaration: Realising the full potential of innovation voucher programmes

Innovation voucher programmes have been established by many European countries and regions to encourage innovation activities of SMEs. Experiences are very encouraging and confirm that innovation vouchers lead indeed to more innovation activities by SMEs and strengthen their ties with research and other knowledge providers. They have the potential to offer flexible and non-bureaucratic innovation support “on demand”, provided by the best available innovation experts and at the moment when it is needed. This should be the future of innovation support in all Member States in order to support the objective of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth of the Europe 2020 strategy as effectively as possible.

With the view to fully exploit the future potential of innovation vouchers for better innovation support, the participants of the Baltic Dynamics Conference 2010 in Riga recommend to respect the following seven principles and policy recommendations for the design and management of innovation voucher programmes:

1. The primary objective of innovation vouchers is strengthening the innovation capacity of SMEs, by supporting them in the best possible manner to build new knowledge networks or to benefit from them. Innovation vouchers are demand-driven innovation support measures and should therefore be defined and implemented in a way that serves practical needs of SMEs. Innovation vouchers can be instrumental to better link SMEs with all forms of knowledge and creativity that are supportive to innovation.

2. Innovation vouchers should support all forms of innovation. This calls for providing access to innovation experts from diverse fields of expertise; the definition of eligible service providers should be based on transparent criteria that promote competition and support the further implementation of an Internal Market for services. This could be supported by commonly agreed definitions of innovation support services concepts that would facilitate their mutual recognition by innovation voucher programmes from different Member States.

3. The administrative costs of implementing innovation voucher schemes should be kept as low as possible. The administrative procedures and control mechanisms should be proportionate to the size of the innovation vouchers and continuously be benchmarked against the “best in class”.

4. Innovation vouchers schemes should be subject of regular impact assessments. Main impact indicator should be the increase of the innovation capacity of SMEs, for which specific targets should be set in advance, depending on the scope and objectives of the innovation voucher schemes.

5. Innovation vouchers schemes should be implemented at local, regional and national level, thus fully taking into account the subsidiarity principle. The European level is encouraged to develop with national and regional entities a voluntary collaboration and brokerage framework for innovation voucher programmes that aims at making excellent knowledge, skills and innovation support services from both public and private service providers across Europe more effectively accessible for SMEs.
6. Innovation voucher programmes have the potential to raise the quality of innovation support to SMEs. New and better approaches to innovation support should be developed and tested through European pilot projects and rolled out at local, regional and national level as widely as possible. In order to speed-up the implementation of better practise in support of innovation, new forms of policy coordination between the different policy levels may be considered.

7. The European Commission, Member States and regions are invited to consider the wider use or promotion of innovation vouchers wherever possible, with the objective to support all forms of innovation more effectively and cost-efficiently and to reduce the gap between innovation leaders and those still lagging behind.

The participants of the international conference on innovation ‘Baltic Dynamics 2010’ invite institutions of Latvia and other Member States to support this declaration in relevant working groups of the European Union.