

Concentrating applied research

JAN MENGELERS,
CHAIRMAN, TNO BOARD OF MANAGEMENT



Photo: Jaap Oldenkamp

‘TNO and other major technology institutes have to forge a new cooperative link’

Since the Lisbon Agreement, innovation has been top of the European governments' wish list. The European Union is pragmatically concentrating its policy on what it calls the *Grand Challenges*, which includes creating a more sustainable society, ensuring adequate food supply, responding to the effects of climate change and preventing international tension caused by the scarcity of energy, water and raw materials.

In countries like France and Germany we are seeing a clear concentration in the knowledge infrastructure whereby institutes for applied science are being employed within the large umbrella organisations for which they were once established: for the valorisation or facilitation of new, economic and social value creation based on the results of scientific and technological research.

The Dutch government also attaches great importance to the power of innovation. And the crucial question that follows: how do we gain more innovative power? Innovation comprises technological renewal on the one hand and social change on the other. That is, different work processes, means of communication, organisation and conventions. In other words, more capacity, smarter working.

My own conviction is that innovation is both a profession and a skill. Innovation these days is acquired mainly through a multidisciplinary approach, by making combinations, systematic thinking, substantial dataprocessing. This requires knowledge institutions, universities and companies to engage in intensive and sustainable cooperation with knowledge of and respect for each other's fields and expertise. The government has an important supporting role to play in this process. After all, innovation is the result of intensive interaction between science, industry and government (read: society) and it requires funding to facilitate it.

A proximity of knowledge and expertise creates the conditions for a kind of pressure cooker for innovation. However, this is something that is only feasible when it is done 'together with others' because complex issues are not constrained by geographical borders; international and multidisciplinary solutions will necessarily transcend the borders of domains and science.

I therefore appeal for applied research to be concentrated so that we can solve the challenges that lie ahead for us over the next few decades. TNO and other major technology institutes will have to forge a new cooperative link to boost complementarity and prevent duplication and overlap as well as better cluster and manage all the major facilities. Even clustering patent portfolios is a potential that should also be investigated. The full picture that emerges will be the result of collaboration and agreement between industry and government.

TNO is willing and ready to take the lead in this clustering of strengths. It is something we will be doing with other research institutions across Europe, starting at home!

jan.mengelers@tno.nl