

RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

INTEGRATING INNOVATION

SA needs to consider cluster concept for R&D, says The Innovation Hub head

Keith Campbell | Senior Contributing Editor

The country needs to improve the cohesion of the national innovation system.

"I think we are building on the good policy foundations of the national system of innovation," asserts The Innovation Hub CEO Dr Neville Comins.

"There has been a strong emphasis on strengthening the research base," he highlights.

"But now we need to strengthen the links between the research base and the business community – we need to build bridges between them; this is not a problem that is unique to South Africa; it's a worldwide problem. Innovation is a complex issue in South Africa because it engages different government departments, various research institutions, academics, business, and so on, and is not easily handled by a single government department; considering only the research level, we have a number of accountable entities," he states.

"If we look at the support systems for research and development (R&D) and innovation, sometimes we find that different elements of these systems are set by different government depart-

ments," he points out.

"And we need to look at the problem on a broader front than just the public sector. There is an increasing need for an integrated system – we have a requirement for 'integrators'," he affirms.

"So, how do you create a platform to close all these gaps?" he queries.

"In many countries, the idea of creating topic-specific clusters of R&D and business, clusters which incorporate such issues as human resources, is becoming a very powerful practice," he cites. This approach is already enjoying significant success in countries such as Finland, France and the Netherlands.

South African researchers and research administrators were recently briefed on this cluster model by French officials at the South Africa/France Innovation 2010 Partnership Seminar, held in mid-November in Johannesburg.

The cluster approach is creating cooperation on a regular basis between partner R&D agencies and businesses with regard to synergistic technologies, accelerating research activities.

Concerning The Innovation Hub itself, it is now at 100% occupancy of the three buildings currently existing on its campus, which is located in Tshwane, immediately to the west of the N1 highway, and opposite the campus of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research.

(One of these three buildings belongs to Sappi and holds the company's R&D department.)

A fourth building is nearing completion and, when finished, will be occupied by engineering company Bigen Africa. "We now have a waiting list to enter the Hub," reports Comins.

"We already have more than 50 companies on the site and we are beginning to see much stronger business cooperation taking place between companies in the Hub, and new products are being developed out of this cooperation," he reveals.

It is this success of the Hub community that is attracting other companies.

"We're awaiting approval on funding for two new buildings – numbers five and six – for our campus; we also have applications from private investors wanting to construct their own buildings in the Hub," he states.

The necessary approvals are expected by the end of the first quarter of next year. "All the activities are consolidating and strengthening; the Hub model is bearing fruit in South Africa, and we are excited by a number of other initiatives in South Africa and Southern Africa to do similar developments in different locations," he concludes.

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