



European Institute of
Innovation & Technology

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VISION FOR A COMPETITIVE EUROPE

INTERVIEW WITH STEFAN DOBREV, CHAIRPERSON OF THE EIT GOVERNING BOARD

31 July 2024



On 1 July, Stefan Dobrev took up his duties as the new Chairperson of the EIT Governing Board. As the Governing Board elaborates the EIT Future Vision Paper, we asked Stefan to share with us the strategic vision and plans that the governing body has for the EIT by answering three key questions.

Q1. Why does Europe need the EIT?

Europe needs to become more competitive to address the major **global challenges** faced by European citizens in all EU Member States. We must:

- Expand Europe's **capacity to convert scientific and technological breakthroughs into commercial successes**, building an entrepreneurial culture, and use EU resources to leverage public and private funds for innovation.
- Meet the **growing demand for technology skills** and **adapt Europe's workforce to the rapid transformation** resulting from digitalisation and our ambitious climate targets.
- Address **structural fragmentation across national borders and sectors**, including economic and social imbalances.

To solve these social and economic challenges, the **European Union** and its **Member States** must leverage instruments, such as the **European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT)**, that have been **designed for this and have proved that they can deliver**. Since 2010, the EIT has been **enhancing Europe's competitiveness** by building pan-European innovation partnerships. Its approach **connects organisations from business, education and research** from across Europe in nine thematic EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs). EIT KICs are dynamic public-private partnerships dedicated to driving innovation tackling global challenges facing our societies such as energy, climate, health, water, raw materials, digitalisation, food, urban mobility, manufacturing and culture.

Through a distinct blend of **partnership, thematic expertise and a shared funding model**, the EIT is well positioned to be one of the key tools needed for Europe's competitiveness. The EIT is an independent body created by the European Union in 2008 to strengthen Europe's ability to innovate. Its overarching mission is *'to increase Europe's competitiveness, sustainable economic growth and job creation by promoting and strengthening cooperation among leading business, education and research organisations and power innovation and entrepreneurship in Europe by creating environments for creative and innovative thoughts to thrive.'*

The EIT is successful because it fosters collaboration, requires 'skin in the game' from all participants (as the EIT expects KICs to eventually be able to sustain their activities without the EIT grant), and relies on deep inside knowledge of specific industries.

Q2. What has been EIT's journey so far?

The final evaluation of Horizon 2020 confirmed the indispensable **role of the EIT and its KICs in overcoming innovation ecosystems fragmentation and in 'feeding' Europe's innovation and talent pipeline**. *'The uniqueness of the EIT lies in its integration of all three sides of the knowledge triangle, which is not an explicit feature of other EU or national innovation-support. KICs add value beyond national support initiatives, primarily by operating across borders and linking KIC partners and beneficiaries with organizations and networks they would otherwise find difficult to access. The EIT Regional Innovation Scheme adds value to and reinforces European regional innovation policy'* (Innovative Europe Study, March 2023).



The EIT has built **Europe's largest innovation network**, bringing together more than **2 400** key organisations in business, education, and research from across Europe and beyond. To date, the EIT has skilled over **350 000** learners in innovation, entrepreneurship, and deep tech, launched more than **2400 new products and services** on the market, and **supported over 9 900 companies** that have **raised almost EUR 10 billion** in external funding. The Institute's activities have resulted in the creation of unicorns and innovative companies **worth EUR 72 billion today**.

EIT Regional Innovation Scheme (RIS) activities contribute to reducing the innovation capacity divide, with over **25% of recent EIT funding** directed to participating countries with below average innovation capacity. The Scheme has helped significantly widen participation in the EIT's activities, creating impact and openness. Accumulated data from 2021-2023 shows that EIT RIS-eligible countries attracted an unprecedented amount of over 40% of the total EIT grant, a significant achievement under Horizon Europe.

Entrepreneurs and innovators across Europe have received critical EIT Community support. The founders of **highly successful start-ups**, such as France's **Verkor**, Sweden's **Northvolt**, Portugal's **Sword Health**, and Estonia's **Skeleton Technologies** credit the EIT's support as a crucial factor in their success. They not only turn research results into products that are critical for our future in areas such as innovative batteries or health care, but they also create thousands of jobs. The EIT fosters this innovation ecosystem by providing innovators and start-ups with key resources, enabling them to successfully commercialise their technologies and **navigating them towards public and private players that can support their scale-up phase**.

The EIT's first three Knowledge and Innovation Communities (EIT Climate-KIC, EIT Digital and EIT InnoEnergy) have **reached financial sustainability – each one with a different model, according to the features and players of their respective markets**. Independent studies have positively assessed the EIT KICs' achievements and progress towards achieving financial sustainability, along with their ability to generate significant private and public investments for specific activities:

- With over 300 partners, **EIT Climate-KIC** has become a key public-private partnership focused on climate innovation. It has helped build over 2 300 start-ups, which generated EUR 1.1 billion of investment, created 15 000 full-time jobs and powered 790 new products.
- **EIT Digital** has upskilled hundreds of thousands of people through its education portfolio, helped create 275 start-ups and supported the scale-up of over 720 ventures who have gone on to raise EUR 660 million in external investment. It has also supported activities of 20 centaurs (companies surpassing USD 100 million in annual recurring revenue) and taken equity in 200+ start-ups.
- Finally, **EIT InnoEnergy** is an active sustainable energy investor and one of the largest cleantech investors. It boasts more than 200 portfolio companies in areas like energy storage, transport, renewables and sustainable built environments, which have collectively raised over EUR 4.8 billion from public and private sources.

In recent years, the EIT Community has also established itself as a **reliable partner in implementing EU policy in alignment with industry needs** with a growing demand for EIT Community expertise from the European Commission services to implement new initiatives, including skills development under the **European Battery Academy** and the **European Solar Academy under the Net Zero Industry Act**. The EIT is also internationally available as a gateway to the EU through EIT global activities for challenges such as **access to critical raw materials**, which cannot be solved in Europe alone.



Q3. What is the future direction of the EIT and how will it boost Europe's competitiveness?

The EIT addresses a key gap in European **competitiveness**: the translation of knowledge into impact for citizens. The EIT compensates this with collaboration, openness, inclusivity, and better connection of local ecosystems. Building on its achievements and learnings as part of Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe, the EIT will significantly strengthen its **focus on facilitating innovation collaboration in Europe**. The EIT Governing Board is considering the following three **priority areas**:

1. The EIT helps Europe collaborate to innovate and tackle new societal challenges

New global challenges and opportunities for innovation are rapidly emerging and are increasingly only addressable through collaboration. The EIT and its KICs have developed a **unique expertise** in the market in **setting up** broad networks of actors and in **building the trust** needed to gain more and more traction, allowing them to eliminate barriers to pan-European and inter-institutional cooperation. We need to capitalise on the assets created and use them to increase our efficiency and speed of action.

Innovation in several areas emphasised in the **Policy Guidelines of the new Commission** can be accelerated by setting up dedicated **new KICs**. These could include, for example, internal and external security or rural development.

Moreover, the EIT proposes transforming its EIT Regional Innovation Scheme into the **European Regional Innovation Booster**. This shift will move the focus from increasing EIT participation and capacity building in widening countries to achieving greater impact for Member States with lower innovation capacities. The emphasis will be on providing in-depth support to the most promising early-stage ventures within the EIT RIS and guiding them towards the EIC, EIF, and other public and private investors.

Given the increasingly dynamic global landscape, the EIT RIS should be enhanced with broadened eligibility, enabling it to deliver tailored, place-based support more rapidly and effectively, in full alignment with EU strategic priorities. **The EIT is in fact a strategic asset in the hands of decision-makers to rapidly implement priority policies by mobilising and coordinating new and existing partnerships.** The EIT needs to focus on acting as a **partnership orchestrator, boosting its operational efficiency and simplicity, sharing knowledge, and building economies of scale**. This position could be taken a step further and serve to connect EIT KICs more strongly with other EU networks and partnerships such as Enterprise Europe Network (EEN), European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIH), and others.

2. The EIT helps meet the EU's talent needs

The unique aspect of EIT's education lies in the **deep understanding that Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) have of their respective sectors, enabling them to customise training programmes** to meet the specific needs of various industries. The strong connections between businesses and universities within the KIC ecosystem facilitate the rapid identification of emerging trends, allowing these insights to be seamlessly integrated into training programmes. This ensures that learners are equipped with the most up-to-date skills.



Meeting Europe's rising need for skilled talents will be achieved by consolidating the **EIT Europe's Innovation Campus**, a coherent portfolio of coordinated education initiatives focused on **innovation capacity building across audiences and sectors to propel research to market and to multiply business creation**. Innovation and entrepreneurship skills are coupled with industry knowledge and needs. EIT education programmes will be built on market needs, innovation training, and industry-recognised qualifications and certifications, promoting **the European degree criteria and facilitating skills portability**.

The Innovation Campus will become a hub where Europe's higher education institutions, vocational training and private sector skills providers will deliver the talent needed for Europe to become more innovative and competitive. It will build on existing programmes such as the Higher Education Initiative, the Deep Tech Talent Initiative, and the Girls Go Circular programme. The EIT Alumni community will become the **European marketplace of talent**, where supply and demand come together enabling a virtuous mechanism of alignment between education offer and market demand for skills.

3. The EIT in strategic cooperation to boost Europe's innovation pipeline

The European innovation ecosystem can boost its chances of success if it catalyses a critical mass of start-ups and VC funding by developing a **'backbone' across the three key areas of the integrated innovation funnel**—the generation of ideas and research (e.g. **ERC, MSCA**), commercialisation, start-up and skills development (**EIT**), and company scale up and growth (**EIC & EIB**).

The need for an effective innovation ecosystem across borders in Europe is fundamental, as converting ideas into businesses requires not only initial funding, but also access to different types of resources: **skills, network, customers and testbeds**. The EIT fosters this innovation ecosystem by providing innovators and early-stage start-ups with these key resources to become entrepreneurs, enabling them to successfully commercialise their technologies and navigate the 'valley of death' phase.

A **common strategy and governance with other EU instruments**, including the European Innovation Council (EIC) and the European Innovation Ecosystems (EIE), is urgently needed to maximise opportunities for European innovators from idea to scale-up in all sectors. It will also require a commitment and dedication of all current programmes (the EIT as well as the others) to **simplify and adjust their processes** to effectively deliver on both their mandate and on synergy opportunities with others.

The EIT's role as an independent EU body is crucial for its success, as it meaningfully involves the private sector and allows for efficient, agile and impact driven decision-making. The EIT Governing Board, comprising of 15 independent members from research, education and business, provides strategic, multi-disciplinary leadership. The financial sustainability achieved by the first three KICs—EIT Climate-KIC, EIT Digital, and EIT InnoEnergy—would not have been possible without the Board's strategic guidance and the unique model developed and implemented by the EIT. The EIT governance model has proven to be robust and reliable, serving as an inspiration for other EU instruments.

Achieving the needed exponential advancements in innovation in Europe—to both decarbonise and industrialise—demands the dedicated nurturing and steering of the **innovation ecosystem**. The EIT is very well positioned to serve as a platform of knowledge and exchange, beyond funding. It can ensure learnings and good practices from its activities are captured and shared widely across the European innovation landscape and aiding decision-makers in understanding and addressing multifaceted issues. The EIT stands ready to be part of this endeavour as a competitiveness 'think-tank' and is committed to deliver on this common European agenda.



We therefore highly welcome feedback from our stakeholders over the coming months. Having listened to and exchanged with the European innovation community, the EIT will then finalise its **input to the next EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation 2028-2034**.