

## Further development of the COMET Programme

### Background

The Austrian Council for Research and Technology Development defined the COMET Programme as a key element of a strategy for excellence from the outset.<sup>1</sup> With successful development of the programme by Austria's Ministry for Transport, Innovation and Technology (BMVIT) and the Ministry for Economic Affairs, Family and Youth (BMWFJ) and financing of the initial rounds of calls an important step has now been taken toward the funding of excellence in the field of cooperative research. A certain amount of experience is now available since the programme started in 2006 and the successful establishment of several K-centres.<sup>2</sup> Further development of the COMET Programme is already under discussion within the framework of the interdepartmental working group used by the RTI Task Force to implement the measures under Chapter 4 of the RTI strategy.

The Council took this as an opportunity to likewise consider further development of the COMET Programme and has now drawn up the present recommendation.

### Recommendation

#### Greater flexibility for structures between the programme lines

The programme document provides for the bundling of national and international expertise of scientific institutions and companies on a long-term basis. Here the K2-centres are clearly committed to institutionalisation and the long-term development of skills. This is an important objective, which is also supported by the Austrian Council.

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<sup>1</sup> In Strategy 2010 the Austrian Council recommended the establishment of new, optimised types of competence centres in continuation of the competence centre programmes K<sub>plus</sub>, K<sub>ind</sub>, K<sub>net</sub>.

<sup>2</sup> The FFG has carried out an impact analysis; interim results are already available. The responsible ministries have commissioned an evaluation of the COMET predecessor programme, the results of which are expected for the end of 2012.

However, this may at the same time also make the centres of excellence in Austria more rigid as, for the time being, the five K2-centres in existence are fixed institutions. Since the programme document states there cannot be any more K2centres, K1-centres with the potential of developing into K2-centres have no possibility whatsoever of doing so in the foreseeable future.

The Council thus recommends making the structures more flexible between the programme lines and realigning the system with the aim of increasing the possible number of K2-centres for K1-centres categorised as excellent. This would in principle allow individual K1-centres to develop into K2-centres. The prerequisite here is that on evaluation and interim evaluation of the K2-centres special attention is paid to also linking negative results to the consequence of closing centres down.

In the Council's view the working group set up to implement the RTI strategy should consider whether it could be made possible for K2-centres without an extension to continue working as a K1-centre. This would also allow it to consider abolishing the link between the size and life of these centres.

For the Council the key issue here is to further develop the aspect of competition which, following establishment of the available structures, has to date tended to focus on competition between existing K1-centres and new initiatives. Any additional costs incurred by the state through greater flexibility will be financed by the necessary increases in GERD as a percentage of GDP, which are required to maintain the budget path adopted here and to achieve the 3.76 percent target.

### **Contribution to be made by universities via performance agreements**

The programme document states that scientific partners enjoying maximum funding are to contribute at least five percent to funding of the K-centre. To make such contribution by the universities more attractive, the necessary budgetary charges should already be laid down in the framework of the performance agreements.

The Council thus recommends also encouraging the universities to contribute to K-centres – and so to research cooperation projects categorised as excellent– via the performance agreements and acknowledging this accordingly. At the very least the contribution made by the universities should not only be reported as operating expenditure under Self-Funding but also as external funding from partners in the universities' intellectual capital reports. As this option is not currently available, the Council recommends adapting the framework conditions as required in this regard.

It should moreover be considered how contributions to COMET-centres can be basically made more attractive for universities. In particular, the universities should be allowed to disclose their output performance in the framework of a COMET contribution (e.g. publications, service inventions,

patents) in a transparent manner. In this context it is also important for the provisions governing intellectual property rights (IPR) to give equal consideration to the interests of the universities, industry and the centres themselves.