

MCST seeks innovation element in government procurement

by [Vanessa Macdonald](#)

The Malta Council for Science and Technology (MCST) is planning to push for government procurement to be changed in a way that would encourage innovation.

"A tender is issued with a long list of specifications, based on a product or service that already exists. Instead, the tender should specify outcomes, MCST chairman David Spiteri Gingell said.

"For example, if you said that you wanted a solution for street lighting which used 20 per cent less energy and produces 20 per cent less carbon dioxide emissions, this would be an incentive for the private sector to come up with new solutions. This is truly a paradigm shift - which requires vision, leadership and the willingness to change from current norms and practices."



Viviane Reding, the EU Commissioner responsible for the Information Society and Media, said a year ago that "pre-commercial procurement of innovation" was important to drive research and development in the EU.

US and Asian economies already procure pre-commercial R&D services.

The MCST will hold six seminars as from May directed towards government and public sector entities, explaining the various stages of innovative procurement, especially the relatively uncharted territory of evaluation when there are no existing specifications against which to benchmark.

"The seminars will draw up guidelines and will also suggest a contract which will take into account the new challenges of innovative procurement," Mr Spiteri Gingell said. These seminars will also be complemented with discussions and fora with industry to suggest how they can respond to innovative procurement. Mr Spiteri Gingell has long been a champion of research, development and innovation. He is very concerned by the fact that Malta's international competitiveness rankings refuse to budge, especially as he is convinced that they do not reflect the present reality let alone the improvements taking place.

"I am convinced that there is a leakage of data on research and innovation being undertaken in both the public and private sector," he said.

"This is important, especially when it comes to international attention and potential investment. If a low ranking is not an overt liability, it is definitely not helping. When it comes to investment, success breeds success."

He plans to tackle this in a number of ways, the first being to set up a system in the public sector that would capture any spending on R&I.

"We need to be able to identify the human resources deployed on R&I, the money spent and so on. We also need to have clear definitions of what research and innovation is, so that these could be identified as a cost centre. For example, if I invent a component to interoperate two different applications - something done as a norm at MITTS Ltd - that is in fact incremental innovation. Unfortunately, in the absence of a Cost of Ownership and Chart of Accounts for R&I, this type of investment is not being captured.

"We will seek to address this by developing a framework by September for introduction in 2008 - and we also seek to share our experiences with the private sector," he said.

Another initiative will include major projects with the National Statistics Office, directed to review and improve the national statistical framework for R&I to capture among others a series of indicators placed in the National Strategy for R&I - such as the number of citations of researchers in science and technology international journals.

Mr Spiteri Gingell believes that the importance of the data stretches well beyond proving a point internationally.

"We do not only want to know how much money is being spent and on what. We also need to be able to follow up the R&I strategic and policy framework and benchmark its effectiveness because, in that way, we can re-direct our efforts if things are not working well.

"It is paramount that we are able to review what we are doing and to have the courage to change it when it is not working - while retaining the lessons learnt!

"Of course data needs to be collected if it is to be of value - and this creates an overhead on enterprise, particularly SMEs. Through EU financing, the MCST will seek to procure or develop an application for statistics collation that would 'obtain' the information defined in the new national statistics framework in an automated fashion. This will be innovative procurement in practice in its own right!"

He said the council will seek to use EU funds to issue a call for the drawing up of strategies for each of the four areas that the National Strategy for Research and Innovation has identified as being the most appropriate: environmental technology; ICT; health biotechnology; and value-added manufacturing and services.

"We need a comprehensive strategy for the coming three years, which would also look at how to manage the strategy itself to make sure that it is implemented," he said.

MCST will also be seeking to tap EU funds to provide bursaries for researchers in the chosen areas. Four will be offered, two each to M.Phil and PhD graduates, at the university of their choice, either in Malta or overseas.

Assuming that the MCST gets the funds, details of the scholarships will be issued in July under the Government of Malta Scholarship Fund - launched for the first time last summer. The winners will be bound to give feedback on their research at various events that the MCST will be organising to promote science and technology.

Work is about to be initiated on a multi-pronged strategy and action plan for the popularisation of S&T. A task force that brings together government, industry, NGOs and education/knowledge institutions has been set up to work on this.

Since the acceptance and launch of the National Strategy, MCST has primarily been mobilising, carrying out the backroom work that will allow it to launch, implement, and sustain a programme of works stemming directly from the strategy. Mr Spiteri Gingell is now anxious to get going with the next phase.

"A very public and aggressive MCST is set to hit the road running after Easter!" he said.

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