

## Chapter 16

# Open Innovation in France: A Case Study of an Emerging Eco-Innovation Cluster

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### ABSTRACT

*France has long been associated with a state-directed “dirigiste” model of linear R&D focussed on large programmes such as development of the TGV high-speed train. Contemporary France has, however, largely left the state-centered model behind, introducing a range of devices since the turn of the 21st century aimed at opening French innovation to international and cross-sectoral collaboration for increased productivity and national competitiveness. This case study traces the opening of the French innovation system and the way one new academic, industrial and government collaboration aims to make use of new features of the system to accelerate development of an eco-innovation cluster focussed on cities of the future.*

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout developed and developing countries, actors in public, private, academic and NGO sectors are seeking to use R&D to improve productivity and competitiveness. This much is not new: ever since Vannevar Bush announced in 1945 to

the US Government that investment in exploration of the ‘endless frontier’ of science would generate social benefits, science-based R&D has been seen and used as a source of ideas from which desirable innovations can be generated. After a decade of R&D in the twenty-first century, this vision of the social role of R&D remains persuasive to many, while increasingly taking a new form.

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Improvements in productivity and competitiveness are certainly sought in the fruits of researcher-led, publication-oriented discovery research, yet increasingly these improvements are ‘by design,’ arising from research collaborations designed from the outset to respond to the needs of some specified set of end users, typically in the spirit of ‘national systems of innovation’ driven by national funders who identify research goals and subsidize research aimed at those goals. This research is increasingly conducted outside the sole control or guidance of the state, as state sponsors are increasingly co-sponsors and partners in international efforts combining groups of diverse actors working at different positions in the value chain or in disparate but related research activities, organized to speed generation of commercially viable and valuable innovations.

This shift in emphasis from individual to team-based research, and discovery to innovation-oriented research, is not, contra some skeptics, simply an elaborate transformation of public goods to the benefit of private interests seeking commercially valuable innovations. While innovation-driven research is still undoubtedly tied to national competitiveness agendas in which private sector success is encouraged by public sector policies and subsidies, the new emphasis on group-based, innovation-oriented research is also driven by globalisation of markets. As the OECD (2008:p.9) puts it, “Global competition drastically shortens product lifecycles while the growing integration of different technologies makes innovation riskier and more costly.”

In response to this situation, a new kind of ‘open innovation’ method and practice is developing in tandem, and perhaps in tension with development of national systems of innovation seeking to improve national competitiveness. ‘Open innovation,’ following Chesborough (2003), the OECD (2008), and others, refers generally to a strategy in which an organization seeks to find and use ideas external to the organization, to enhance the effectiveness of the organization’s pursuit of

its goals – whether cost reduction, technology portfolio diversification, speed or quality of development, or some other aspects of development of a typically technological product, process or method. Often open innovation involves blending collaboration and competition of diverse players, aiming to satisfy the diverse interests of benefit all participants in a collaborative research endeavour. Open innovation as a strategy and social phenomena has arisen and has been characterized and evaluated chiefly in the context of large, multinational firms and increasingly, academic units, in North America (e.g. IBM, P&G, Chevron, Los Alamos National Laboratories, Genome Canada).

Yet the utility of open innovation is clear for SMEs, who typically have fewer resources to commit to innovation R&D, but often have specific niche knowledge ideally suited to systems of open innovation, and other countries seeking to improve competitiveness, and open innovation is now being studied in these contexts. This is not simply, however, a situation of lagging and catching up, or the ‘old world’ learning lessons from the ‘new world.’ While the nature and merits of European open innovation structures, and those of SMEs, may bring distinctive lessons to the increasingly global community of innovators, open innovation is not a one-size-fits-all proposition and the supporting infrastructure and policies need to be suited to the appropriate market and cultural contexts.

One new French approach to open innovation can be observed in the context of the newly-created industrial Econoving International Chair in Eco-innovation at the University of Versailles in Paris, France. This Chair is a multidisciplinary partnership between industrial firms and university researchers designed to create and catalyse synergies between players with different backgrounds and competences to generate eco-innovations, and to train the next generation of multidisciplinary eco-innovation managers. Industrial members of the chair include multinational businesses Alstom, GDF-Suez, Italcementi, Saur, SNCF and government partner l’ADEME.

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