

Interview with Stephan VERIN, International Executive Officer of Up Tex cluster, Nord Pas de Calais, France

Could you explain the rationale behind the cluster?

The Up Tex cluster was created in 2005 following the adoption of the Competitiveness Cluster Policy in France. The policy aimed at promoting bottom-up initiatives to increase competitiveness in various sectors and regions. At the end of the first stage 71 cluster initiatives were selected by the government for financing.

One of the tasks of the cluster is to review research projects and approve them by means of awarding them with a sort of 'label'. Only selected projects may be eligible for national funding.

What is your organisational structure?

The cluster is a French voluntary organisation that started with two employees and expanded to nine employees currently. The Up Tex cluster was the first cluster in this French policy initiative to open a branch in Brussels- we are convinced that the future of our sector will be defined at European level.

How are you funded?

The Up Tex operates mostly on public funds: 70% of its budget comes from public resources, (of which 10% is national government funding, 40% comes from local authorities and 20% from ERDF (European Regional Development Fund)). A 30% of the funds are private.

This schema of funding is culturally based as France has a long tradition of giving public grants and funding a variety of initiatives. The balance is slowly shifting towards private funding, also depending on the type of research that is conducted. The textile sector is dominated by SMEs with limited resources.

How did the textile sector change and adapt to new market conditions?

Given the fierce competition faced by European textiles, particularly from Asia, companies had to excel at developing new technologies and materials, tapping into new markets such as transport, composite materials, health, construction, etc. New partners with specific skills were required.

At some point we realised that we needed new materials for new solutions. In order to provide them, new partners with skills in specific domains or sectors were necessary. Even though the whole concept was rather top-down, the common aim of putting people together to increase innovation and R&D, was successfully put in place.

Did anything change during the five years of your existence?

When the cluster was set up it was purely national but many of our companies were international, and soon we realised that we had to enlarge our focus. We started cooperating with clusters from other EU countries: our tightest links are with other EU countries, notably Spain and Belgium. But we decided to expand our cooperation to clusters from Canada and Taiwan. We also work with the recently created ERA-Net Cross Tex Net aiming at strengthening the European Textile research and industry in a more coordinated way.

How do you see the role of the Up Tex cluster?

Clusters are a way to bridge the gap between SMEs and academic partners. Taking part in an ERA-Net is a way to bridge this gap, adding the European dimension to the work. It needs to be stressed that in Europe there should be more of a cooperation in all the areas in order to avoid duplication of for example having a couple of studies on the textile industry but done by

different countries. There should be a drive for a European research strategy in specific sectors that would allow better development. Roadmaps that would be prepared would be implemented by the clusters.

What kind of obstacles do you experience in your daily activities and at the time of establishing the cluster?

The main difficulty has been, and still is, bringing together people from industry and universities to work together on projects. It was obviously easier in case of large companies, more used to research cooperation. But SMEs still perceive their neighbours as their main competitors and don't think about the European or international dimensions. We have to bear in mind that the textile sector is largely dominated by the SMEs therefore for instance collaborative projects are more difficult to be conducted.

Another issue is the scale of research. SMEs are only able to take part in small projects with quick results, but public research is mostly characterised by large scale. On top of that there is a sort of competition between funding entities; universities prefer FP7 funding as they get more money from it, and they put all their researchers to work on them. For SMEs there are other, more accessible sources of funding.

How important is development of skills for Up Text?

For the moment we are not focussing on skills. However, our new project CETI (a research, innovation, demonstration and valorisation centre) addresses the need for new skills. Its aim is to bring together different textile research stakeholders to facilitate broader cooperation.

We see the future of the textile sector in top end technologies that will reduce consumption of energy and raw materials and increase the added value. The industry needs to move further in customisation of new products.

Do you cooperate with some ETPs? How close is this collaboration?

The Up Tex cluster works very closely with the textiles ETP. André Beirnaert, the President and the founder of the cluster, used to cooperate with EURATEX (the organisation managing the Future Textiles and Clothing ETP). The ETP roadmap was taken up as the cluster's roadmap. In the near future we would like to establish more links with non-textile ETPs. It would also be interesting for us to become a part of a JTI or an EII.

Our cluster gets more funding than the ETP and has more critical mass at the European level.

What are your challenges for the future?

To move forward with our international activities in Asia, North America and BRIC countries. And to broaden our collaboration to non-textile sectors where there can be markets for textile products.

To read more visit the following website:

<http://www.up-tex.fr/>