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Shaping the Future through R&I

Research and Development (R&D) is defined as innovative work undertaken on a systematic basis to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of mankind, the environment and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications and services, by way of potential solutions to societal challenges.

The Maltese Government is cognisant of the fact that research and innovation (R&I) plays a crucial role in supporting economic growth, and this administration, through its electoral manifesto, has reiterated its commitment to putting R&I at the heart of Malta's future growth and prosperity.

Through the Malta Council for Science and Technology (MCST), we are currently in the process of finalising the draft R&I Strategic Plan, with a view to launch for public consultation in the coming weeks. The draft R&I Strategic Plan sets out the priorities over the coming years, most notably that of strengthening the governance of R&I in our country. This forward-looking Strategic Plan draws on current context as well as performance and progress on the goals set in the previous Strategy.

Strengthening R&I governance makes sense on many levels. It sends the right signals to the researcher community, whether in the public or private sphere. It signals that research is important for Malta's future prosperity. It underscores that research is not only a vibrant economic sector in itself, but it can also act as an enabler for further economic growth and social wellbeing across all economic sectors – from agriculture to transport to tourism and health. It signals that we need to change the narrative and challenge the common mentality surrounding R&I locally.

For us, research and innovation will act as central plank for further diversifying Malta's economy and thus enhancing our resilience as we transition into a new post-COVID reality. For this reason, I believe that we have an urgent need to use R&I effectively to increase the resilience of our economy, public services, business and society. This is in turn dependent on the championing of R&I at the highest levels in Government and Parliament. The mentioned draft plan

gives priority to putting in place effective structures and a robust policy design, addressing five main overarching goals: governance and priority-setting, enhanced directionality, local ecosystem development for enhanced performance in the private sector, mainstreaming R&I in public policy, and strengthening implementation structures.

We also need to ensure that the targets for increasing public and private sector R&I investments are met, with an emphasis on the green and digital transitions. For this purpose, we need to further empower both the public and private sector, with the necessary capacities to better undertake research performing endeavours in the coming years. Such a vision can be achieved through a "whole-of-government" approach to research and innovation.

In order to upgrade and modernize Malta's national Research and Innovation (R&I) framework, this Government has adopted a new Smart Specialization Strategy, which will also facilitate access to EU funding for R&I in selected economic sectors. The priority areas covered by the Smart Specialisation Strategy are health and wellbeing, smart manufacturing, marine and maritime technologies, sustainable use of resources and aviation and aerospace. The Strategy will ensure access to the required R&I funding support to strengthen research in the six thematic areas identified and guarantee the continuity of the necessary investments throughout the lifecycle of the strategy.

This Strategy provides, amongst others, a particular focus on fostering business R&I, strengthening public-private cooperation, inter-agency collaboration, raising awareness of R&I funding, and simplification of related procedures. The anticipated benefits of this Strategy are expected to be the better targeting of holistic efforts, increased transformation of research findings into marketable solutions as well as building competitive advantage in the selected niches.

The massive increase in the budget of Horizon Europe, administered locally by MCST, undoubtedly the most ambitious EU funding program for research and innovation ever and the largest transnational programme of its kind worldwide, which now totals the amount of €95.5 billion, gives a clear political message at a European level that Research and Innovation are the key factors to drive our future. Our ambition locally is equally ambitious. Through our reinvigorated R&I policy framework, we shall strive to ensure that Malta can sustain and further develop a vibrant and internationally attractive R&I eco-system.