EUROPEAN CLUSTER COLLABORATION PLATFORM

From Lab to Market: The role of collaboration between technology centres and clusters

Summary

EU Clusters Talks
12 February 2025, 8:30 – 9:45 CET

An initiative of the European Union

From Lab to Market: The role of collaboration between technology centres and clusters

The European Cluster Collaboration Platform, on behalf of the European Commission, organised the EU Clusters Talk "**From Lab to Market: The role of collaboration between technology centres and clusters" on 12 February, 8:30 – 9:45 CET**, to explore new collaboration opportunities with these two economies and markets.

Agenda of the meeting

Moderator: Chris Burns

1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
   Ángela Negrete Benedí, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
2. European Monitoring of Industrial Ecosystems – An insight into the technology centres mapping
   Els Van de Velde, Senior Expert Competitiveness & Innovation, Idea Consult
3. European Monitoring of Industrial Ecosystems- Co-location of technology centres and cluster organisation
   Vincent Van Roy, Expert Innovation, Competitiveness & Sustainability, Idea Consult
4. Panel debate
   Inge Arents, Managing Director, FlandersFood
   Michal Zemko, Executive Director, COMTES FHT and President of Klastr Mechatronika
   Kateřina Podaná, Executive Director, Klastr Mechatronika
   Braz Costa, General Manager, CITEVE
5. Funding opportunities
   Ángela Negrete Benedí, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Key messages

- Clusters are key to bridging the gap between cutting-edge technology and real SME adoption.
- Access to joint R&D is the main driver of value in cluster and tech-centre cooperation.
- Clusters act as trusted translators between SMEs and research centres, language and trust matter.
- Pathfinder projects show how AI and sensor tech can transform traditional industries through clusters.
- Face-to-face interaction remains essential, especially when demonstration and prototyping are involved.
- Funding mechanisms like cascade schemes and vouchers empower clusters to support SME innovation.
- Trust-based networks are crucial; clusters succeed when they act as relationship brokers.

1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Ángela Negrete, team member, European Cluster Collaboration Platform

After the introduction by moderator Chris Burns, the following news items were presented:

1. Save the date for the EU-Ukraine Business Summit.
2. Register for the C2Lab in Zaragoza, 19-20 March 2025.
3. Register now for CmR Eindhoven, Netherlands, 26-27 March.
4. Discover the EMI Technology Centre Mapping Tool and subscribe to the Newsletter.

2. European Monitoring of Industrial Ecosystems – An insight into the technology centres mapping

Els Van de Velde, Senior Expert Competitiveness & Innovation, Idea Consult

Els Van de Velde presented an overview of the mapping of technology centres as part of the **European Monitoring of Industrial Ecosystems**, an initiative promoted by the Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW) of the European Commission. The project aims to provide a useful tool to **monitor the performance of Europe's industrial ecosystems**, with a particular focus on their green and digital transitions.

She explained that the monitoring project is structured around **five key pillars**: technology generation, technology uptake, investment and funding (public, private, and foreign), skills supply and demand, and competitiveness. The mapping of technology centres sits under the second pillar—technology uptake—and was the focal point of the presentation.

The purpose of the mapping is to identify and register relevant technology centres across all EU Member States. A **technology centre** is defined as an organisation that hosts infrastructure and facilitates the journey of innovation "from lab to market", supporting SMEs in overcoming the so-called "valley of death" in technology deployment. These centres must be active at Technology Readiness Levels (TRL) 3 to 8, work directly with SMEs on practical projects, and possess the equipment needed to support applied innovation.

Inclusion in the mapping requires the fulfilment of a set of qualitative criteria and at least two out of four quantitative ones, allowing some flexibility. Els Van de Velde stressed that the **mapping does not cover universities** but rather focuses on entities engaged in later stages of technological development.

The resulting directory is available online and features filters by industrial ecosystem, technology, and TRL. It includes **centres from all 27 EU countries**, with strong representation from both larger nations such as Spain and France and smaller Member States. The speaker encouraged participants to explore the website, check whether centres in their region are included, and invite any missing centres to apply for inclusion. Each centre's profile includes a general description, services offered, available equipment, and—crucially—a direct contact person. This last element is essential to facilitate effective engagement between SMEs and the centres.

3. European Monitoring of Industrial Ecosystems- Co-location of technology centres and cluster organisation

Vincent Van Roy, Expert Innovation, Competitiveness & Sustainability, Idea Consult

Vincent Van Roy presented the findings of a study conducted within the framework of the European Monitoring of Industrial Ecosystems, specifically focusing on the co-location of technology centres and cluster organisations. This work forms part of a broader effort to analyse the spatial and thematic dynamics of industrial actors across Europe. The study was based on data from the Technology Centre Mapping and the European Cluster Collaboration Platform (ECCP) and aims to produce a series of eight ecosystem-specific reports covering areas such as agri-food, construction, mobility, and energy-intensive industries.

He began by outlining the distribution of technology centres and cluster organisations across Europe, with an emphasis on the green and digital transitions. For example, it was shown **that 60% of technology centres are active in renewable energy,** with more than half involved in biotech and advanced materials. Similar distributions were analysed for digital technologies, including robotics, artificial intelligence, IoT, augmented reality and blockchain. These insights were generated through keyword-based web scraping techniques that were cross-validated using self-reported data from technology centres.

Maps showed where technology centres and cluster organisations are located together in Europe. Regions like **Catalonia and the Basque Country** stand out, with key players such as Tecnalia and Leitat supporting joint innovation.

Concrete examples include **Build Denmark** and **FORCE Technology** working on smart sensors for construction, and Lithuania's BACC cluster teaming up with Kaunas University of Technology and Continental. In Spain, the Aerospace Technology District collaborates on aircraft parts using advanced materials, while in France, the Mobility Cluster works with CEA and CENTUM TS on electric vehicle technologies.

A statistical analysis at the national level revealed a **positive correlation between the number of technology centres and cluster organisations** within a country, suggesting a tendency towards co-location. However, limitations in data completeness were acknowledged. These stemmed from the ECCP and Technology Centre Mapping databases, as well as the accuracy of web-scraped information, which can be affected by outdated websites. Attendees were encouraged to ensure the accuracy of ECCP profiles and to update any outdated information.

4. Panel debate

Inge Arents presented a successful case involving a traditional biscuit producer in Flanders that used AI and sensor technology, in collaboration with technology providers and manufacturers, to improve product quality and reduce waste. This project evolved into a broader initiative called Pathfinder, aimed at creating a modular approach for food SMEs to adopt digital technologies, in partnership with technology centres like Sirris.

Michal Zemko shared his experience from the Pilsen region in the Czech Republic, where proximity between clusters and tech centres fosters effective collaboration. He emphasised the role of events and networking in building partnerships, particularly in cross-border cooperation with Bavaria. As both a technology provider and a cluster member, COMTES FHT serves as an example of dual functionality within the ecosystem.

Kateřina Podaná highlighted the critical role of clusters in translating technical knowledge into practical solutions for SMEs. She noted that companies often struggle to communicate with researchers, and clusters serve as trusted intermediaries. She cited a case where cluster members collaborated on titanium sheet processing, facilitated by her close relationship with researchers.

Braz Costa outlined how Portugal's textile cluster integrates its technology centre, CITEVE, and promotes cross-sector collaboration with industries like automotive and defence. He shared examples of SMEs working with larger firms to develop textile-based sensors and lighting systems for vehicles. He also stressed that clusters serve as testing grounds for public policy, referring to how defence R&D policy was piloted within the cluster before national adoption.

Regarding the financial models of collaboration, Inge Arents explained that in Flanders, clusters benefit from public support and membership fees, and projects are typically funded at cost, without success fees. Public schemes like cascade funding or collective research projects help lower the entry barrier for SMEs. Michal Zemko confirmed a similar approach in the Czech Republic, citing voucher schemes and special pricing for members.

One question from the audience concerned how research and innovation results are integrated into industrial ecosystems. Inge provided the example of Pathfinder and other collective research projects where R&D outputs are turned into practical demonstrations. Braz Costa added that frequent meetings and special interest groups within the Portuguese textile cluster ensure a continuous feedback loop between researchers and businesses. Kateřina mentioned a case in additive manufacturing where real-world demonstrations helped SMEs understand and adopt innovations.

There was broad consensus among the panellists that geographical proximity is beneficial, particularly in manufacturing sectors where physical pilot plants and demonstrations are key. However, in more digital domains or smaller regions, this proximity was considered less critical. Inge Arents and Braz Costa strongly agreed on the importance of **face-to-face collaboration** when testing or demonstrating processes, while Kateřina Podaná noted that trust and **cultural closeness** also play significant roles.

All speakers agreed that clusters act as translators and facilitators between SMEs and R&D entities, ensuring research is relevant and accessible. There was also agreement that the success of such collaborations depends on shared goals, accessible funding mechanisms, and mutual understanding.

5. Funding opportunities

Ángela Negrete, team member, European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Closing the EU Clusters Talk, Ángela Negrete shared the following examples of funding opportunities:

1. Digital label: one source of comprehensive information for medical technology products; deadline 23 April 2025
2. Development and Deployment of Advanced Key Technologies; deadline 27 March 2025.
3. EIC Accelerator 2025 - Short application; deadline 18 December 2025.
4. Opportunities for SMEs: Calls from Euroclusters; published on European Cluster Collaboration Platform.