

S U M M A R Y

- P. 2 RESEARCH: ESPRIT continues to forge ahead
ESPRIT II provokes a flood of proposals.
- RESEARCH: Superconductivity gets on the agenda
The European Commission launches a new Community action.
- P. 3 ELECTRICITY: Producing your own?
The European Commission wants the Twelve to encourage electricity generation by others than the public utilities.
- P. 4 EDUCATION: From Sarrebruck to Warwick, via Lille
Birth of the first truly European programme of legal studies.
- AGRICULTURE: An apple a day ... but preferably European
The European Commission restricts imports from the Southern Hemisphere.
- P. 5 INTERNAL MARKET: Financial institutions are well placed to profit from the single market
From credit cards to exchange commissions and insurance policies.
- MARITIME TRANSPORT: A European flag to eliminate abuses?
The European Commission on the advantages of a European ship register.
- P. 6 ENVIRONMENT: Ecology can be taught!
The European Commission wants school curricula to include environmental studies.
- P. 7 SOCIETY: A ray of hope for handicapped people
The EC Council of Ministers has adopted the HELIOS programme.
- P. 8 SHOWCASE: The EC under one roof in Brisbane
World Expo marks 200 years of European settlement in Australia.
- P. 9 TO OUR READERS: Target 92

RESEARCH: ESPRIT continues to forge ahead

ESPRIT II provokes a flood of proposals.

The flood of proposals received by the European Commission is the clearest evidence of the success of the European Community's research programme in the information technologies, ESPRIT. The first call for proposals for the programme's second phase, ESPRIT II, resulted in 700 projects being submitted. To fund them all would require a massive ECU 10 billion*, while the Commission has no more than ECU 1.2 billion at its disposal. The selection, clearly, will be ruthless.

The call for proposals closed on April 12, the day after the EC Council of Ministers had given ESPRIT II the final go-ahead - and some ECU 1.6 billion of Community funds. The first projects to be financed under ESPRIT II should be launched at the end of this summer. The programme itself will run through 1992.

The idea which underlies the ESPRIT programme has proved its worth. This is to get universities, companies and research institutes in the different EC countries to work together on pre-competitive research projects, with the costs being shared 50-50 between the Community and those taking part in the projects.

Many of the 200 ESPRIT I projects have already led to commercial products, such as the "mini-supercomputer" developed by Thorn EMI and Telemat. The new ranges of computers promise a greatly improved price/performance ratio as compared to conventional computer architectures.

RESEARCH: Superconductivity gets on the agenda

The European Commission launches a new Community action.

Superconductivity, which is the absence of electrical resistance, will soon be the subject of a joint research effort involving European companies, universities and private research institutes in the various EC countries. The work could be financed within the framework of ESPRIT II, as regards the parts which interest the electronics sector, and the Community programme aimed at bringing together European scientists and researchers for the others.

The discovery of high-temperature superconductivity by two European scientists in 1986, for which they won the Nobel prize in 1987, could have important applications in the field of computers, medical informatics and micro-electronics, to mention only a few. It is this which prompted the European Commission recently to invite industrial and university teams in Europe to submit to it transnational R&D projects. The Commission hopes that such projects could lead quickly to industrial applications.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.67 or IR£ 0.78

ELECTRICITY: Producing your own?

The European Commission wants the Twelve to encourage electricity generation by others than the public utilities.

Most of us depend on public utilities for the electricity which lights our homes and runs our electrical appliances. But a business or collectivity can generate its own electricity, and some in fact do so in order to meet their own needs. The European Commission would like others to follow their example, especially if they can save energy by using renewable sources, including the sun, wind, running water, wastes and underground heat.

But that companies, for example, will actually do so cannot be taken for granted. The Commission has therefore asked the Twelve to remove the barriers to such a development. The fact is that for technical and economic reasons those who would like to generate their own power must cooperate to some extent with the local electricity company, which is in a veritable monopoly situation. Even so, cooperation can be further handicapped by national laws and regulations. At a time of relatively low oil prices, this can easily discourage those who are prepared to pursue self-sufficiency.

This has led the European Commission to propose that cooperation between them and the public utilities be based, throughout the 12-nation Community, on principles likely to facilitate production by the "producer-consumers". To begin with, the latter should be authorized in all Community countries and not be hampered in any way by laws and regulations or conditions laid down by the electricity companies.

The proposed measures would not be binding, once adopted. But most of the energy savings realized by the European Community since 15 years result from national policies pointed in a common direction.

EDUCATION: From Sarrebruck to Warwick, via Lille

Birth of the first truly European programme of legal studies.

Nine students from the universities of Warwick, Lille II (France) and Sarrebruck (Germany) will embark on a programme of legal studies with a European flavour during the academic year 1989/90. Having completed three years of traditional legal studies, the nine will spend four semesters on an integrated European programme, the first of its kind.

In addition to a semester spent in their own university in the usual way, the programme includes three others which the nine will spend together in each of the three universities in succession. This will give them an opportunity to study the harmonization of national laws in the perspective of the single internal market, set for 1992. The universities will take these studies into account when awarding the nine their degrees.

The European Commission's legal department helped draw up the new programme of studies. The presidents of the three universities signed the agreement giving it official status in the presence of the European Commission President, Jacques Delors.

AGRICULTURE: An apple a day ... but preferably European

The European Commission restricts imports from the Southern Hemisphere.

Imports of apples from the planet's southern extremities* cannot exceed a fixed level (just under 522,000 tonnes) during the current agricultural year, which ends in August. The European Commission in fact is allocating quotas to each of the countries in question. Once they have been filled, no further import licences can be issued. This has already happened in the case of Chile.

The European Commission takes the view that Community imports of apples from the Southern Hemisphere would exceed 600,000 tonnes during the 1987/88 agricultural year if it did not take steps to limit them. The fact is that last year, when the Commission set the import quota at 492,000 tonnes maximum, European producers had difficulty selling off their output. More than 300,000 tonnes had to be withdrawn from the market in 1987. Imports from the Southern Hemisphere rose by 27% between 1984 and 1987.

* Mainly Argentina, Chile, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

INTERNAL MARKET: Financial institutions are well placed to profit from the single market

From credit cards to exchange commissions and insurance policies.

Financial institutions and their customers stand to gain handsomely from the creation of the single market in 1992, along with bankers and insurance agents. Peter Sutherland, the European Commissioner with special responsibility for the European Community's competition policy, in fact believes the financial sector will benefit more than others from the completion of the common market. The gains could exceed ECU 25 billion*, Mr Sutherland told the first European congress on financial services, which he inaugurated in Berlin recently.

The single market should make it possible for consumers to make payments anywhere in the Community, thanks to genuinely European credit cards. It should also mean reduced charges for a wide range of services offered by banks and insurance companies.

At present these charges vary enormously from one Community country to another. The difference often is of the order of 50%, although it can reach 100% in the case of credit cards and 250% for bank commissions on foreign exchange transactions.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.67 or IR£ 0.78

MARITIME TRANSPORT: A European flag to eliminate abuses?

The European Commission on the advantages of a European ship register.

Faced with a multiplicity of flags of convenience, including "off-shore" or "second" ship registers, the European Community should consider the possibility of a European ship register, linked to fiscal or financial advantages for shipowners. The European Transport Commissioner, Stanley Clinton Davis, made the suggestion during a speech at Cardiff, but admitted that it was unlikely that a single independent registry will be set up in the near future.

Community shipping circles nevertheless believe that quick action is needed. Between 1983 and 1987 the Community fleet was reduced by 38% in absolute size, while the world fleet recorded a decline of only 5%. During the same time employment in the Community's maritime sector was virtually halved because of technological advances.

A growing number of European shipowners are registering their ships in tax havens or in the Isle of Man, Gibraltar, or the French Kerguelin Islands, all territories offering "flags of substitution".

ENVIRONMENT: Ecology can be taught!

The European Commission wants school curricula to include environmental studies.

If it is to be taken seriously, ecology must be taught like any other subject in the curriculum. Hence the European Commission's decision to ask the European Community Council of Ministers to invite the educational authorities in all the member states to include environmental studies at all levels of teaching as well as in vocational training programmes.

This should reinforce public awareness of environmental issues and, what is perhaps even more important, lead people to behave in a way which is more favourable to the safeguard of the environment and of natural resources.

However, it is necessary to this end that both government ministers and educational authorities take into account the main objectives of environmental education when drawing up teaching programmes. It is equally necessary to make provision for both practical activities and the training and improvement of teaching staff.

The Commission is proposing a series of initiatives at the Community level, including meetings and seminars. It will also put at the disposal of young people and teachers basic written material; facilitate exchanges between young people and encourage them to take the initiative in environmental matters. Summer courses could be organized at European universities but cooperation between the universities and industry on environmental matters will be included in programmes such as ARION, ERASMUS and COMETT.

As for the subjects to be studied, they would include the environment as man's heritage; environmental equilibrium and the need to maintain it; the rational use of natural resources; the environmental effects of man's activities and the ways in which people can contribute, especially as consumers, to environmental protection.

SOCIETY: A ray of hope for handicapped people

The EC Council of Ministers has adopted the HELIOS programme.

The Greek word for sun is helios, as everyone knows. What could be more natural, therefore, than to make it an acronym for the European Community's second action programme in favour of Handicapped people in the European Community Living Independently in an Open Society? The HELIOS programme, which has just been adopted by the EC Council of Ministers, seeks to promote the social and economic integration of people who are physically or mentally handicapped, and to enable them to lead independent lives.

More than 30 million Europeans, or nearly 10% of the Community's population, are handicapped. Their situation is deteriorating, unhappily, because of the growth in their numbers, on the one hand, and the economic constraints, related to the continuing crisis in employment, on the other.

The main objective, therefore, is to institute, for the first time in the Community's history, a coherent, global policy covering all the relevant issues. The HELIOS programme's immediate goal, however, will be to continue and intensify the coordination and cooperation with the member states, already begun under the first action programme, which expired on 31 December 1987. The programme will also provide the basis and framework for developing political initiatives, especially proposals for legislation.

The first phase will be marked by a report which the European Commission will submit to the Council of Ministers in the course of the next few months. It will deal with the employment situation of handicapped people in the various member states and the measures that need to be taken to improve it.

The Commission also plans to send the Council, before the end of the year, the first directive aimed at reducing the difficulties faced by persons of limited mobility. Other legislative proposals will follow in the coming years, dealing primarily with ease of access to public buildings, integration at school and the impact of the new technologies.

The HELIOS programme attaches a good deal of importance to the participation of the milieus which are directly interested. It envisages consulting them in the preparation and elaboration of specific actions to be undertaken. As for the budget, an indicative sum of ECU 19 million* is earmarked for the period 1988-91, to fund activities at the Community level.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.67 or IR£ 0.78

SHOWCASE: The EC under one roof in Brisbane

World Expo marks 200 years of European settlement in Australia.

The 12-nation European Community is on show under one flag at the World Expo in Brisbane. This is the fair mounted by the Australians to celebrate 200 years of European settlement. The Community's pavillion, described as a "free passport to Europe", offers visitors a unique opportunity to discover Europe's cultural variety without visiting the Old World.

The EC pavillion is the largest international presence at the World Expo. It is also the hub of a cluster of seven pavillions, representing not only the Community but also six of its member states: Britain, France, Germany, Greece, Italy and Spain.

The Community's pavillion has three elements to it. The first consists of a series of interactive video machines, crammed with information on the Community, its past, present and future. The visitor has only to press a button to be presented with a variety of subjects to choose from: the Mediterranean, the Alps, the North Sea, the treasures of European art and architecture; the history of Europe, of the Community; the European manners and customs

The second element is nothing less than a replica of a turn-of-the-century town square. It is a mixture of the old and the new, complete with park benches, street lamps and cobble stones. The visitor is literally surrounded by Europe, as 24 projectors show the human face of Europe on 12 screens.

The third element is a large map of the European Community. Once again, all the visitor has to do is to press a button to see various European localities light up electronically.

Visitors can go to the information centre, where a multilingual staff is ready to give them more detailed information. A mural display shows the Community's latest achievements in high technology, such as the Airbus, the Ariane rocket, the Météosat weather satellite, etc.

Several hundred thousand visitors are expected at the World Expo, which will remain open for six months.

TO OUR READERS

The Newsletter "Target 92" is edited jointly by the Directorate-General of Information, Communication and Culture and the SME Task Force of the Commission of the European Communities. It contains news of the wide-ranging moves towards the completion of the single Community market and information of specific interest to companies.

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