



IASP

International Association of Science Parks
and Areas of Innovation

WHITE PAPER

THE ROLE OF SCIENCE PARKS AND AREAS OF INNOVATION TO GENERATE LOCAL IMPACT WITH EUROPEAN RELEVANCE

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Introduction

The International Association of Science Parks and Areas of Innovation (IASP) is the world's leading network of innovation hubs. Founded in 1984, it connects professionals managing science and technology parks (STPs), innovation districts (IDs), areas of innovation (AOIs) and other innovation spaces across more than 75 countries. Europe is home to one of IASP's strongest regional divisions representing over 150 parks and areas that support thousands of startups, scale-ups, research institutes, and corporations. These members (from here on referred to as STPs and AOIs) act as engines for regional and national economic growth by translating scientific research into market-ready solutions and connecting innovation stakeholders locally, nationally, and internationally.

Purpose of the White Paper

With this white paper, the IASP Board seeks to present a coordinated message to the European Commission. The goal is to explain how STPs and AOIs contribute to achieving the ambitions of the European Innovation Agenda and the forthcoming European Innovation Act. The document builds on the outcomes of recent workshops and strategic discussions to provide concrete proposals for joint actions, describe the role of STPs and AOIs in scaling European innovation, and outline what is needed from policymakers to maximize this impact.

How STPs and AOIs Contribute to Europe's Innovation Goals

Europe is at a critical turning point. While it has a world-class research base and outstanding talent, it struggles to scale these advantages into global competitiveness. The Draghi Report of September 2024 highlighted this challenge, calling for unprecedented levels of investment to close productivity gaps and address Europe's dependency on external technologies and materials. In this context, STPs and AOIs offer ready-made platforms to turn regional excellence into European-wide value. They build local ecosystems that bring together universities, research centers, start-ups, and established businesses. Through this orchestration role, they foster collaboration across sectors and accelerate the commercialization of research. STPs and AOIs also provide critical infrastructure for scaling deep-tech ventures, helping them move from low technology readiness levels to market. These organizations specialize in translating local strengths into assets that serve European missions such as decarbonization, digitalization, and strategic autonomy. They connect regions acting as Regional Innovation Valleys in line with the five flagships of the NEIA (New European Innovation Agenda, 2022), promoting cross-border alliances that align with EU priorities. Their role as bridge-builders is further strengthened by offering internationalization services, connecting European innovators with global markets, and by mobilizing both private and public investment into start-ups, scale-ups, and spin-offs. STPs and AOIs represent valuable assets for growth and innovation committed to supporting the European Innovation Strategy and to enhance our common innovation potential.

Concrete Actions to Scale Impact

The IASP community proposes several concrete initiatives to strengthen its contribution to Europe's innovation strategy. A priority is to launch structured partnerships between parks through initiatives like 'Mix-Match STPs,' promoting staff exchanges and the sharing of best practices. IASP members are committed to working on joint missions around big topics such as green technologies, digital transition, and health innovation. Increasing collaboration on European projects, both through bilateral partnerships and larger consortia, is seen as essential. Members also propose to address the so-called 'valley-of-death' by promoting regulatory sandboxes that allow innovators to test solutions in real conditions. Strengthening funding skills and launching joint sustainability actions are other key priorities. Additionally, IASP members aim to enhance their impact by building Regional Innovation Valleys, connecting mature and emerging parks, mapping and sharing specialized infrastructures, and by attracting and enhancing talent. Collecting and publishing impact data, use cases, and open data resources on shared platforms will further support evidence-based policy making and collaborative innovation.

Requirements and Proposals for European Policymakers

To maximize the impact of the European Policies Europe must recognize the STPs and AOs as strategic players in its innovation ecosystem. Policymakers are urged to mobilize both public and private investment, including through improved access to venture capital. Administrative processes should be streamlined, and eligibility criteria for funding programs should explicitly include STPs and AOs. Greater visibility for these actors in European strategies and communications is essential, as is the development of common metrics to measure and promote their impact. Fiscal incentives, such as tax breaks, could encourage further investment in these ecosystems. Grant application processes should be rethought to better integrate STPs and AOs as facilitators of innovation. Expanding programs like Erasmus to include exchanges between innovation managers and ecosystem builders would strengthen cross-border learning. Public procurement must also be reformed to better accommodate innovations from start-ups and non-mature companies. A holistic funding approach is needed, covering the entire innovation journey from research to market. Finally, Europe should invest in data platforms that enable the sharing of open data to drive digital and data-driven innovation. Both new and long-established parks and areas of innovation should be equally recognized for their contributions, and their voices should be more actively included in European policy discussions.

Top 6 Needs for Consideration by the European Commission

These top 6 proposals are the result of collaborative insights gathered from IASP members, workshop participants and expert inputs, and are presented as priority actions to maximize the local and European impact of STPs and AOIs in supporting the European Innovation Agenda:

1. Formal Recognition and Legal Classification of STPs and AOIs

Establish a clear European-wide recognition framework that legally acknowledges STPs and AOIs as critical players in Europe's innovation ecosystem. This recognition would enable better access to national and European funding schemes, public-private partnerships, and policymaking processes.

2. Simplify and Increase Access to European Funding and Programs

Streamline the processes and criteria for EU funding programs to ensure that STPs and AOIs are explicitly eligible. Reduce administrative burdens, reform state-aid regulations to facilitate TRL 6-10 funding, and expand dedicated programs such as a "European EXIST Program" to support early-stage innovation. Rethink grant application formats with more potential involvement of STPs and AOIs. Establish criteria to be met by STPs and AOIs which increases their eligibility on calls.

3. Establishment of Tax Breaks for Startups and Scale-Ups

Create specialized economic zones within or near STPs and AOIs with fiscal incentives for high-tech companies, such as tax breaks, reduced administrative barriers, and innovation-friendly regulatory frameworks and sandboxes. This will foster attraction, retention and growth of startups and scale-ups and stimulate job creation and technological advancement.

4. Improve and/or Rethink Public Procurement

To enable more innovative products and solutions from non-mature start-ups and new companies to hit the market, the public procurement rules should encompass adjustments to allow start-ups and scaleups to be able to provide their product and services. This would strongly boost the innovation degree of the European public sector while opening a powerful market for new technologies.

5. Expansion of Talent Mobility and Ecosystem Exchange Programs

Launch structured cross-border exchange programs, similar to Erasmus+, for innovation managers, researchers, and entrepreneurs. This would enhance peer learning, skills development, and knowledge sharing across Europe's innovation ecosystems, strengthening their collective impact.

6. Development of European Open Data Platforms

Promote the creation and usage of European-level Open Data Platforms (Data Spaces) to enable data-driven innovation. STPs and AOIs can contribute and benefit from these platforms, improving transparency, collaboration, and the acceleration of research-to-market pathways. STPs and AOIs should hence be considered as potential test environments for future projects and be explicitly mentioned in upcoming calls under the Digital Europe Programme.