During 2019 and 2020, Member States will update their Smart Specialisation Strategies as part of the negotiations on the European Regional Development Fund operational programmes post 2020. With this in mind, John Edwards, from the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre, explains how Portugal is reflecting on S3 implementation and improving its strategy.

At this time last year, the Centro region of Portugal was celebrating yet another REGIOSTARS award. The Business and Shared Services Centre at Fundão, on the edge of the Sierra da Estrela national park, has helped to dynamise the local area. In previously empty buildings provided by the municipality, the European Regional and Development Fund has funded shared research and staff facilities, co-working office space, a business incubator, digital FabLab and a training centre, among other exciting initiatives. The Centre now hosts 14 businesses, including four multinationals, creating more than 500 qualified jobs.

However, the focus of this award-winning project on information and communication technologies is no accident. It is one of the priorities of the Centro region’s Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3). Moreover, some of the related sub-projects are linked to other S3 priorities, such as forestry, tourism and health.

Developing new ideas and cross-cutting projects is the common objective of the region’s four innovation platforms established in 2015. Such ‘entrepreneurial discovery’ is the cornerstone of smart specialisation and in Portugal it has happened by means of the regions being proactive and reaching out to entrepreneurs.

Energising strategies

It is not only Fundão that shows what can be achieved through a strategic approach. For example, it was during a working group on the renewable energy priority in the Algarve that the Culatra 2030 project was born. With a vision to develop a decentralised system of electricity production, it has recently been selected as a pilot by the Clean Energy for EU Islands Initiative.

Another example is Madeira, where S3 is trying to find new opportunities within an existing dominant industry, namely tourism. These include a project on designing the industrial kitchen of the future, which involves the island’s university and an international, Madeira-based hotel chain.

Discovering and sharing S3

Smart specialisation has given Portugal’s regions the chance to develop and subsequently improve their own innovation strategies. This has been an important learning process.
since Portugal has not had formal regional innovation strategies before. This was the reason for a gathering of all seven Portuguese regions in Faro in May 2019. Hosted by the Algarve, the participatory workshop allowed the people managing S3 to share experiences, ideas and plans, as well as to examine the European Commission’s proposals on smart specialisation post 2020.

The following day, the results of the workshop were shared with representatives of the Portuguese government as well as an international audience. Participants were pleased to hear the views of their Spanish counterparts on cross-border cooperation and from the Italian Agency for Cohesion about monitoring S3.

In Faro, Professor Dominique Foray, who has done much to develop and disseminate the concept of smart specialisation, shared his thoughts on how it can be improved. Most of all, regions need a continual process of discovery, once the priorities have been established rather than just before, the aim being to build a critical mass of related projects.

Everyone present welcomed the emphasis on S3 governance in the proposed regulations. From the lively discussions and enthusiastic presentations, it is clear that there is great potential for innovation in the Portuguese regions. Enhancing the governance structures and the opportunities for entrepreneurs, researchers and many others who have a stake in where they live is the best way to make good on this promise.

“Smart specialisation has given Portugal’s regions the chance to develop and subsequently improve their own innovation strategies.”

RIS3 managers from the seven Portuguese regions, Northern Netherlands and Eastern Macedonia and Thrace (Greece), with experts for the JRC projects on Targeted Support to RIS3 Implementation.