

Korean SMEs Set to Partner with World-Class Research Institutions to Accelerate Global Expansion

A new pathway is opening for Korean small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to take their technologies beyond domestic borders – by working side by side with some of the world’s most advanced research institutions.

Beginning this spring, Korea’s Ministry of SMEs and Startups (MSS) will roll out the first phase of its 2026 Global Collaborative R&D Program, an initiative designed to connect high-potential Korean firms with leading laboratories and universities across Europe and North America. The objective is straightforward but ambitious: to help local innovators co-develop globally competitive technologies and translate them into real market opportunities overseas.

At the heart of the program is a multi-year commitment. Selected companies can receive up to KRW 1.5 billion (approx. USD 1 million) over three years, supporting joint research, technology transfer, and commercialization efforts. But the financial support is only part of the equation. What distinguishes this initiative is its emphasis on deep, structured collaboration with globally recognized institutions.

This year, the network of partner institutions has expanded significantly – from just two last year to eleven – bringing together organizations such as Germany’s Fraunhofer and Steinbeis, the Netherlands’ TNO, Switzerland’s CSEM, the University of Toronto, and leading US institutions including Purdue University, Georgia Tech, Johns Hopkins University, and Mass General Brigham.

The scale of the program has grown in parallel. Following support for 66 projects last year, MSS plans to back 157 new projects in 2026, with a total budget of KRW 43.4 billion (approx. USD 28.6 million). The initiative will focus on six strategic industries and twelve emerging sectors, reflecting Korea’s broader push to align SME innovation with global technological trends.

Rather than a single-track scheme, the program is structured into several distinct pathways – each tailored to different stages of collaboration.

One route begins with early-stage exploration. Through the MIT Industrial Liaison Program (ILP), Korean firms are matched with researchers to shape joint research agendas, paving the way for technology transfer and longer-term collaboration. This track will expand modestly this year, supporting five projects.

A second pathway offers a more structured entry point. Global partner institutions have already put forward 647 technology proposals. Korean firms will be selected as potential collaborators – roughly 200 in total – and will spend up to six months developing joint R&D roadmaps. From there, around 100 companies will move forward into full-scale research projects.

For companies with established global networks, a third track allows greater autonomy. Firms that have already identified overseas research partners can apply directly to pursue joint R&D. This category is set for a significant expansion, with the number of supported projects rising nearly fourfold. Priority will be given to high-performing startups and scale-ups as unicorn candidates and participants in Korea’s flagship innovation programs – reflecting a shift towards backing proven innovators with global ambitions.

The program also introduces a specialized track for the pharmaceutical and biotech sectors. Under the “Eco-Bridge” initiative, selected companies will collaborate with major international pharmaceutical firms on projects spanning early-stage discovery to clinical development. Ten pilot projects are planned for this year, marking a more targeted effort to integrate Korean biotech firms into global drug development pipelines.

Applications for the first round open on April 6 and run through April 24 via Korea’s integrated R&D portal

(www.iris.go.kr). A second round – covering additional tracks including Eco-Bridge and general open collaboration – will follow later in April.

As competition intensifies in emerging technologies, the message behind the program is clear: for Korean SMEs, global competitiveness is no longer just about exporting products – it increasingly depends on co-creating innovation at the source.

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