2011 has been a successful year for the European Patent Office. Despite the economic downturn in some regions, patent filings grew again to reach almost 250 000, representing roughly a 4% increase. This is the highest number ever in our history.

More than 60% of these applications came from non-European states. This underlines the attractiveness of the EPO as a global player and of the European economy.

Europe is a global innovation hub, both for inventors and investors. We respond to the growing demand by stepping up our efforts on the quality of patents. Although some 62 000 European patents were granted, the grant rate remains at less than 50%.

This commitment to quality is recognised by our users. They rated us again, and I quote, "best patent office in the world" in two separate independent polls. We also performed about 40% of the searches for international patent applications, known as PCT filings. This is another demonstration of the confidence users have in the quality of the products delivered by the EPO.

2011 has also been a year of real progress on major concrete projects such as patent classification and machine translation.

For classification, our cooperation with the USPTO is very efficient. We should be able to deliver, by the beginning of 2013, a common system, based on the European scheme, which has the potential to become a world standard.

Concerning our agreement with Google on machine translation, we have recently launched the first six pairs of European languages, covering 80% of European applications, from our website and free of charge. The complete system will be ready by the end of 2014 and will include the 28 languages of the EPO member states and, in addition, Japanese, Chinese, Korean and Russian.

I am convinced that this will also give a boost to the introduction of the unitary patent system for EU member states.

Decisive progress on that dossier has been made in 2011. The heads of States and governments of the EU have committed themselves to finalise the project, including the Unified patent court, by the end of June 2012.

I am confident that the EPO, with all its services and expertise, will present itself as a strong and reliable partner for the European economy when it comes to deliver and administer unitary patents.

More generally, our aim is to provide more and better services to our users. Two words can summarise our strategy: quality and efficiency. In 2011, we have developed strategic roadmaps for the next four or five years in five key areas: human resources, quality, IT, buildings and co-operation and we have now begun to implement these roadmaps.

In conclusion, the EPO’s foundations are sound and solid. With the commitment of our staff, and the support of our Member States, I am confident that, in the future, we can continue to play and even to develop our role in supporting innovation, competitiveness and economic growth - in Europe and worldwide.