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An interview with Mr Yves VERSCHUEREN

Managing Director essenscia

What are essenscia’s key figures and missions?

The chemicals, plastics and life sciences sector is a very important industrial sector in Belgium. In 2023 it represented 100,000 direct jobs, 250,000 indirect jobs, 75.1 billion € turnover, and 25.2 billion € in trade surplus. In addition, the chemicals and life sciences sector remains the undisputed leader in innovation. The amount spent on research and development (R&D) in Belgian chemicals, plastics and pharmaceuticals more than doubled in the last decade to 6.3 billion € in 2023, a new record. The sector accounts for two thirds of all industrial expenditure on R&D in Belgium, mainly due to the high R&D intensity of life sciences companies active in pharmaceuticals and novel biotechnologies.

Innovation is undoubtedly a key element in ensuring the sustainable anchoring of the sector in Belgium. No wonder that essenscia’s mission is to ensure a stimulating framework for companies to keep innovating for a more sustainable future. Our world is facing important challenges in the use of energy, the protection of natural resources, and the provision of food, water and health for its growing population. Chemistry and life sciences are essential to making the world’s development sustainable. Its innovative research is crucial to the development of new products, applications and services.

The chemistry innovation agenda is broadly structured around a so-called double twin transition: the industry has to become climate neutral and circular, transition to more safe and sustainable products, and simultaneously digitize its (production) processes at a rapid pace. The capture and storage or utilization of CO2, the development of a hydrogen economy, the electrification of production processes, the use of bio-based raw materials or the chemical recycling of plastic waste: all these technologies have the potential to contribute to a more sustainable economy and society.

In life sciences, the aim is to accelerate the development of new medicines and vaccines, using pioneering technologies such as messenger RNA, plasmid DNA, genome editing, biosensors, cell and gene therapy and the use of monoclonal and polyclonal antibodies. This should lead to more targeted treatments and personalised medicine tailored to the patient.

What services do you offer your members in terms of information, training and advice?

In the field of information, we offer discussions in working groups on strategic priorities as well as information sessions on hot topics. As regards formation, let us mention VLARIP (Vlaanderen REACH Implementation Project in Flanders) and WALRIP (Wallonie REACH Implementation Project in the Walloon region) for REACH and CLP, along with annual seminars on product policy, crisis communication and social themes. With the Process Safety Academy and the Security Club we provide several in-depth training sessions on process safety. The essenscia Patent Cell offers free advice and information on intellectual property management, including technology trend watching. essenscia also offers tailored advice, expertise and advocacy on new legislation and strategic priorities.

Could you present essenscia’s activities in terms of innovation and patents?

Innovation is at the core of our federation and numerous initiatives have been launched: the essenscia Patent Cell, the Innovation Award (the most prestigious award in Belgium for industrial innovation, with the 6th edition coming up in 2025) and the Innovation Fund (39 investments in promising companies). What is more, essenscia has engaged in innovation clusters in Flanders (Catalisti) and Wallonia (GreenWin, BioWin). essenscia is also the main shareholder in BlueChem, the first incubator for sustainable chemistry in the Benelux that has opened its doors in 2020. And let us not forget that our federation was the driving force behind the foundation of the National Fund for Scientific Research in the 1920s. A decade characterized by an innovative alliance between science and industry, which resulted in the famous Solvay Conferences and world conferences on chemistry in Belgium.

Could you give us some examples of new products,

applications or services developed by the chemical, plastics and life sciences industries to address major global challenges?

Let me first mention that the chemicals, plastics and life sciences sector is a solution-provider to tackle climate change. In that prospect, it is designing insulation materials for energy-efficient construction and household appliances, lightweight materials for sustainable transport, components for renewable energy and electric car batteries. It is also striving to turn CO2 into a valuable resource, to integrate plastics in a circular economy and to boost the industrial application of hydrogen.

On the other hand, Belgium has become an internationally renowned ‘health and biotech valley’. Our country hosts some of the largest vaccine production sites in the world. At the same time, we can count on a high concentration of pharmaceutical and biotech companies that are working on – and already have come up with – breakthrough medicines, therapies and production processes that can help patients worldwide.



© Essenscia - Belgium played a key role in the fight against the coronavirus.
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