Interview with Mr Johan HANSSENS

Secretary-general of EWI

What are EWI’s core tasks?

The Department of Economy, Science and Innovation (EWI) is responsible for policy preparation, policy follow-up and policy evaluation for the sectors of economy, science and innovation within the Flemish government. In this framework, our most important goal is to allow Flanders to evolve into one of the most progressive and prosperous regions in the world.

Our three levers in this are the promotion of excellent scientific research, an attractive and sustainable business climate and a creative, innovative and entrepreneurial society. EWI strives towards excellence in fundamental research, strategic knowledge development and the exploitation of this knowledge. Prerequisites for this are human capital and research infrastructure. In addition, we follow up the policy themes that are related to the development of an attractive and sustainable business climate and the stimulation of innovation and entrepreneurship.

The focus of the Flemish cluster policy is on a limited number of large-scale and ambitious spearhead clusters. These spearhead clusters will develop and implement an ambitious long-term strategy and competitiveness programme for the Flanders strategic domain, in collaboration with companies, knowledge centres and the government. Catalisti is our spearhead cluster for sustainable chemistry and synthetics, Flux50 in energy, VIL in logistics and transport. For agrifood we have Flanders Food as our spearhead cluster. Blue Cluster is focussing on blue growth. Medvia – the most recent cluster, founded in 2021 – crossovers in biotech, medical and digital technologies or, more generally expressed, in health and care. It aims to develop and promote economic activities in the health tech domain, in particular the development of an internationally leading ecosystem around the convergence of technologies at the interfaces between biotechnology, medical technology and digital technologies. The four themes Medvia focuses on are personalized medicine, digital medicine, disruptive health solutions and value-based efficient health and care.

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How does EWI carry out fundamental and strategic basic research?

Excellence is very much the keyword in scientific research. The ambition of Flanders is to finance the most excellent research using this criterion. Flanders has a number of different instruments for the funding of fundamental and strategic basic research at the Flemish public knowledge institutions such as universities, strategic research centres and other research institutions. Based on this, the EWI department implements a clear policy, coordinates and evaluates these funding mechanisms.

Assignment of a specific grant or subsidy to a researcher takes place through the knowledge institutions themselves or through our agency FWO. In addition to this funding, it is naturally also important to be able to have excellent researchers and research infrastructure. For this reason, we are also investing in our human capital and in state-of-the-art research infrastructure in Flanders and internationally.

Can you give some examples of research funds/programmes?

The Industrial Research Fund (IRF) is an internal designation fund of a university association (a university and one or more colleges) whose resources are used for strategic basic research and applied scientific research. The objectives of an IRF are – in the short to medium term – to stimulate the interaction between the association and the business world and to build up a portfolio of application-oriented knowledge within the association. In the medium to long term, an IRF must result in better coordination of the strategic basic research and applied scientific research with the economic needs and the application and exploitation of the profile of business knowledge built up. The IRF thereby fits into the broader whole of efforts to strengthen the interaction between higher education institutes and economic players.

The Odysseus programme aims to bring researchers with a foreign career to Flanders via early-stage funding for scientific research. This may involve both leading researchers with international recognition – who lead the way and have a post at a foreign university – and researchers who have the potential to be among the world's best in the near future. For a period of five years, they are able to build up their own research group. The organisation of the Odysseus programme is in the hands of the Fund for Scientific Research – Flanders. Universities take the initiative to nominate candidates. They provide an academic position, the infrastructure, offices etc. Universities can also nominate a candidate together. Approved projects receive between 100,000 and 1,500,000 euros a year for a five-year period.

What is the importance/added value of strategic research centres?

Strategic research centres (SRCs) have formed thanks to the excellent and relevant results of academic scientific research in a wide range of scientific fields in micro- and nano-electronics, biotechnology, digital technologies, environmental topics and our manufacturing industry. With a view to economic and social valorisation, we continually strive for an appropriate balance between targeted and non-targeted research. In that regard, the strategic research centres have an important bridging function between fundamental and applied research. SRCs therefore also play an important role in the transformation of the Flemish economy. The marketing of their knowledge through the (co)-creation of spin-offs forms an important part of this. In addition, in other sectors – such as clusters in the agri-food industry, sustainable chemistry & synthetics, energy, logistics & transport, blue economy and health – Flanders also applies an integrated

support, research and knowledge policy. Flanders has 4 SRCs that are world leaders in their field. VIB for biotechnology, imec for nanoelectronics and digital technology, Vito for cleantech and sustainable development and Flanders Make for the manufacturing industry and industry 4.0.

Can you evaluate the result of these efforts on the international place and reputation of Flanders?

In Belgium, almost 81% of the total public R&D&I support is managed by the Communities and Regions. Flanders counts for 58% of all Belgian public R&D support. The European Commission ranked Flanders in the Region Innovation Scoreboard 2023 as an ‘innovation leader.’ Flanders spends about 3,65% of its GDP in R&D. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) maintains a ranking, which compares the R&D-efforts of its country members. In the most recent list, Flanders was ranked first, before Sweden, Belgium, Austria and Germany.

Several international rankings in which academic or knowledge institutes are listed, provide an indication of their relative strength in an international perspective. All Flemish universities score very high on these different ranking. On almost each ranking they belong to the top 3% worldwide. KU Leuven and Ghent University even rank in the top 1% in each of the three major rankings. Each ranking uses different criteria with different weights in their calculation of the ranking position.

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