

An interview with Ms. Pascale DELCOMMINETTE

CEO, Wallonia Export & Investment Agency (AWEX) and Wallonie-Bruxelles International (WBI)

Could you tell us about the research and innovation promotion actions carried out by AWEX and WBI?



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Wallonia Export & Investment Agency (AWEX) and Wallonia-Brussels International (WBI) have developed a joint strategy for French-speaking Wallonia and Brussels innovation actors: universities, research centers, innovation clusters and companies. To do this, they rely on several networks active abroad, namely a network of academic and scientific advisors and a network of economic and commercial advisors as well as several strategic partnerships with foreign ecosystems, allowing technology and innovative companies to rapidly access markets with strong potential growth. Furthermore, WBI negotiates and activates bilateral research agreements in order to support international research and innovation projects as well as to promote the international mobility of researchers.

AWEX and WBI carry out various promotional and support activities. For example, each year the two administrations have a joint stand at the Hannover Messe, the world's largest industrial technology fair. This major event allows us to present the entire

innovation value chain with university spin-offs, start-ups, applied research centers, etc. The international visibility of our skills is thus reinforced, as are the opportunities for international collaboration. In addition, AWEX and WBI participate in various economic missions, technological missions, state visits, etc.

Since 2016, we have also been collaborating with the French-speaking Belgian online media [Daily Science](#): our science articles promote the scientific know-how of our ecosystem. Since 2021 and the renewal of the Wallonia Smart Specialization Strategy, we have also been supporting a range of strategic innovation initiatives led by our research and innovation stakeholders. A great example is the organization of an annual summer school by the TRAIL institute through our international networks. This event took place in Berlin in 2022 and in Nantes in 2023, allowing us to connect with other AI excellence ecosystems and position ourselves in European projects. This type of event is set to be developed and amplified along with other strategic innovation initiatives in the coming years.

How do you support the export activity of innovative Walloon companies?

We accompany them through technological missions that meet their needs in terms of commercial accessibility to major international markets. These needs include on-site technological validation (with connection points for this validation), connection with local accelerators, acquisition of industrial property, and preparation of fundraising, access to local innovation or demonstrators. We rely on strong innovation ecosystems with trusted partners for companies to grow and develop their innovations.

With this in mind, AWEX's annual action program, which includes 150 to 180 actions depending on the year, will increasingly specialize in these international technological missions, beyond the promotion of "pure" exports. We can also count on WBI's Research & Innovation Unit, which, with the support of our network of academic and scientific advisors, promotes the excellence of our innovative ecosystems internationally and strengthens the presence of our players in international research cooperation programs and networks.

How does the One Stop Shop service help foreign companies wishing to set up research activities in Wallonia?

We capitalize on a legislative and fiscal environment that is favorable to such establishments, both at federal and regional level: this is demonstrated by the numerous incentives and tax deductions.

But that is not all: the attractiveness of our ecosystem based on a strategy of smart specialization is just as important. Innovation clusters, companies and universities offer an interesting network of academic, industrial and financial partners. In addition, we have concluded soft landing agreements with [WSL](#), located in Wallonia and considered to be the 6th largest technological incubator in the world. WSL does a fantastic job of welcoming and supporting innovative start-ups. Finally, AWEX has set up dedicated and specialized teams to monitor projects, to stimulate exports and to attract foreign investment.

How do you support the revival of Walloon companies active in the research and innovation sector?

The health crisis has highlighted the creativity and innovation of our ecosystem. All the technological sectors were mobilized to provide rapid responses to various issues: the production of personal protective equipment and parts for respirators, the transformation of production lines, collaboration with research centers, etc. It is this dynamism and reactivity that we want to encourage by informing all R&D operators of international missions, European programs through [Horizon Europe](#), etc. We also make sure to identify local partners abroad in order to create connections for future research partnerships. This dynamic is already well underway with Brazil and Quebec. The support we provide for the mobility of our researchers and entrepreneurs is also part of this approach.

Finally, we are keen to make companies aware of the importance of sustainable transition: it is crucial that they integrate this parameter into their DNA if they want to succeed in relaunching their activity and to convince their stakeholders of their commitment to social responsibility.