An interview with Mrs Vinciane GAUSSIN

Managing Director, WEL Research Institute

What are the key figures for the WEL Research Institute?

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Formerly known as Welbio (Walloon excellence in science and biotechnology), the WEL Research Institute added, in 2022, a second department to its historical department in life sciences to support strategic research in engineering sciences, chemistry and physics. It is an inter-university institute subsidized by the Walloon region, with 51 investigators and 350 laboratory members, which promotes scientific excellence and the translation of the results for a societal and economic impact in health and sustainable transition. Since 2022, its funding from the Walloon region was increased to €24.75 million annually. The international reputation of our investigators is illustrated by over 800 publications in prestigious journals and more than €40 million received in the form of prizes and European or international funding. Our investigators are also behind 42 patent applications with gross industrial income of €9.5m and the creation of 6 spin-offs that have raised €84m in funds and created 32 jobs (figures for 2022).

How does the WEL Research Institute support strategic fundamental research in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation?

Strategic research aims at increasing knowledge and making unexpected discoveries, as well as translating results into beneficial societal and economic impact. That’s why our investigators can be allocated up to €1.4 million over 4-year periods to help them develop ambitious research programmes that address critical unmet needs in their fields and achieve scientific breakthroughs that can be socially beneficial.

What support do you offer researchers to help them integrate the industrial value-added approach into their work?

The WEL Research Institute provides researchers with a framework and support to help them transition their results from the laboratory to the marketplace – an uncharted territory for most of them. With this in mind, we organise several meetings a year to identify unexpected results that could be the subject of a patent application, and to develop strategies to transfer the results to industry, whether by creating a spin-off or granting an operating licence. For example, Pierre Coulie and Sophie Lucas (UCLouvain) developed a therapeutic antibody to boost the immune response against cancer which is now investigated in phase II clinical trial in solid tumours by AbbVie.

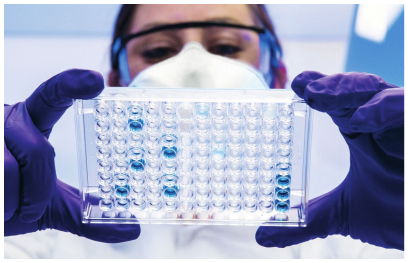
I would also like to mention 3 of the most recent spin-offs: **THERAtRAME**, the result of work by Alain Chariot, Francesca Rapino and Pierre Close (ULiège) which develops new targets linked to transfer RNA for the treatment of cancers; **NeuVasQ**, based on the work of Benoit Vanhollebeke (ULB) for treatment of severe neurological conditions; and **Santero Therapeutics**, founded by Abel Garcia Pino and Cédric Govaerts (ULB) for the development of new antibiotics to address the emergence of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

What does the Bridge Fund programme involve?

It concerns cases of intellectual property generated by our investigators that has not reached a sufficiently high TRL level. The aim is therefore to fund initial stages of development to attract the attention of an industrial company or investors. Since the creation of the institute in 2009, 7 projects have been supported by the Bridge Fund, with a total budget of €900,000. The coming years should see a significant increase in the number of opportunities to be supported, given the increased funding from the Walloon Government.

What partnerships have you developed to increase the number of opportunities?

Our core partnership is with the 5 universities in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, whose investigators have a dual affiliation (university and WEL Research Institute), and with their KTOs (Knowledge Transfer Offices). We also maintain close links with the Walloon competitiveness clusters and with companies in Wallonia and beyond. Our aim is to sound out their needs and propose an appropriate technological offering based on the work of our investigators.



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