An interview with Prof. Françoise SMETS

Rector of UCLouvain

What are the key figures for research at UCLouvain?



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The 3,600 researchers at UCLouvain, 30% of whom are international, represent an impressive pool of knowledge and skills. The ERC Grants that they win each year are a very good barometer of the quality of their research. Since the creation of these grants, 61 have been awarded to our scientists.

But research at UCLouvain also means that every year 300 doctoral students — half of whom come from abroad — defend their theses, testifying to the sustained activity in high-level research and advanced training. With its 23 research institutes, our university covers a wide range of scientific disciplines. These institutes are driving forces behind interdisciplinary and innovative research. The 51 technology platforms that these institutes manage are at the service of excellence in research, teaching and the regional economy.

UCLouvain collaborates with more than 500 institutions around the world, further strengthening its scientific network and global impact. These collaborations cover a wide range of fields, from fundamental to applied research. Each year, UCLouvain is involved in more than 2,500 research projects and produces more than 3,500 publications, mainly in international peer-reviewed scientific journals.

These figures reflect UCLouvain’s importance as a national and international research university, as well as its role in training new generations of scientists and innovators. All this research and results are made possible by an annual investment of 316 million euros in research, from various sources such as European, national and private subsidies. But also, and above all, thanks to the investment of every member of our community, who work every day to make possible and push back the limits of research excellence at UCLouvain.

What are the areas of research excellence at UCLouvain?

As a comprehensive research university, UCLouvain develops research in a multitude of fields and societal challenges. What's more, these days, excellence is the key to obtaining research funding. Excellence is therefore omnipresent in our research institutes in the health sciences, science and technology, and the humanities and social sciences.

Sustainable development and the ecological transition are at the heart of our university's concerns and therefore of its research activities. UCLouvain is proud to be ranked 67th (first Belgian university) in the latest Time Higher Education (THE Impact) ranking. This ranking assesses the performance of universities worldwide in relation to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



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UCLouvain's spectacular leap (50 places) in this ranking illustrates the effectiveness of the university's sustainable development strategies. One of the strengths of our university highlighted by this ranking is innovation and the development of our research (patents, spin-offs, etc.) in relation to transition. UCLouvain has a major ethical duty and societal responsibility to commit to a transition towards a sustainable society. It has a duty to be at the forefront of societal thinking in this area. This is what we are doing, with cutting-edge research that is having a positive impact on our society in transition.

Could you give us a few examples of research projects underway at UCLouvain?

Among the many research projects being carried out at UCLouvain are the Horizon Europe projects under the European Union's Framework Programme for Research and Innovation for the period 2021-2027. To date, we have obtained funding for the coordination of 7 projects of this type, which is also an excellent indicator of the quality of our researchers and the projects they are developing in the context of transition and

service to society.

To be selected by Horizon Europe, projects must contribute to achieving the United Nations' sustainable development goals and stimulate competitiveness and growth in the EU. Two examples are DeepHorizon, which aims to improve soil quality, and BE-SAFE, an interdisciplinary, patient-centred approach to combating dependence on sleeping pills.



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What are UCLouvain's main research partnerships?

UCLouvain collaborates with more than 500 institutions worldwide. Each of the 3,600 scientists who make up our university is developing their network and generating new collaborations and partnerships with the aim of going ever further in the understanding of their field of research. It is therefore difficult to rank these numerous and complex partnerships in extremely varied fields.

Examples include our partnerships with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the European Space Agency (ESA). The MIT-UCLouvain Seed Fund supports exchanges of researchers, professors and research students between the two institutions. The agreement covers all faculties at MIT and all sectors at UCLouvain. With the ESA, we have several projects underway, including the SEN4STAT (Sentinels for Agricultural Statistics) project, which aims to improve agricultural statistics using satellite Earth observation.

Could you tell us about LouvainTRANSFER's activities?

LouvainTRANSFER is the knowledge transfer arm of UCLouvain. Its raison d'être is to 'connect Research and Society to build tomorrow's world together'. Its mission is to offer a wide range of services and expertise, to create and strengthen the link between researchers and socio-economic players, and to support them in transforming their research results into a socio-economic impact, thus sustainably amplifying the virtuous circle of 'research – valorisation – research'.

LouvainTRANSFER supports the researchers from the identification of ideas through to exploitation of research results in the form of licenses, spin-offs or new research projects.

What are the most recent spin-offs created from the work of UCLouvain researchers?

- **Genko (Rombio)** in the field of artificial intelligence, to increase effectiveness of the production of pharmaceutical products.
- **NeGIO Therapeutics**, which aims to develop treatments in the field of oncology.
- **Stellaris**, which offers an original method for screening small molecules and cellular markers.
- **Biocsol**, which is developing new-generation pesticides that are more effective and environmentally friendly.
- **Thermo Power** in the field of thermoelectricity.
- **Balencio**, a platform for managing the development of an organisation's human potential.

What is your assessment of Louvain4: UCLouvain's cross-disciplinary research initiative?

Aware of the need for a global and transdisciplinary approach to studying certain societal issues, UCLouvain launched the Louvain4 consortia in 2013. These consortia bring together researchers from all sectors of the university to focus on major contemporary issues such as energy, education, space, nutrition and migration.

What awards have UCLouvain researchers received in 2024?

Our researchers are widely recognised and rewarded each year with numerous prizes and awards at both Belgian and international level. This year, for example, Profs David Alsteen and Tanguy de Wilde d'Estmael, and Profs Sandra Soares Frazao and Valérie Swaen were awarded the Royal Academy of Belgium Prize in Physics, Political Science,

Engineering Science and Management Science respectively.

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of Christian de Duve’s Nobel Prize, these prestigious awards bear witness to his legacy and the synergy between scientific excellence and service to society that is so dear to UCLouvain.