

An interview with Mr Pierre-Yves JEHOLET

Vice-Chairman and Walloon Minister for the Economy, Industry, the Digital Economy, Employment and Training

How do you view the current state of the Walloon economy, and what are your priorities in this area?



© Pierre-Yves Jeholet's cabinet

We need to ensure that our economy develops further. Despite our strengths, the indicators are not good. An employment rate of just 66.2% is too low. Wallonia's economic situation is closely linked to the qualifications and training of young people, which are not up to the needs and expectations of our businesses. Our priority is to focus our policy on training and education. It's also about responding better to employers' skills needs, and even anticipating them, with a view to economic development.

In Belgium and Wallonia, we have an exceptional fabric of businesses and talent. However, it has to be said that the training on offer does not always match the needs of businesses, which can lead to shortages of the kind we are currently experiencing. Simplifying and rationalising the institutional and educational landscape, as well as the training and employment landscape, would help to make these sectors clearer, more efficient and more coherent.

Administrative simplification is clearly a priority. The watchword is efficiency! Rationalisation and simplification are ways of achieving this. We're going to refocus

resources and efforts on measures that promote economic recovery and meet current challenges and needs.

How are you working with the Government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation to ensure a continuum between the research activities funded by the two institutions?



© Pierre-Yves Jeholet's cabinet

Dialogue and collaboration are essential if our investments in research and innovation are to bear fruit. This synergy is now reinforced by the dual role of Minister-President Adrien Dolimont, who is in charge of research for both the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and the Walloon Region. This facilitates close and coherent coordination of strategies between the two entities.

The aim is to build bridges between the different levels of government, encouraging practical collaboration and fluid exchanges. The aim is to ensure that scientific advances and funding are not compartmentalised, but complement each other. This involves shared mechanisms for supporting research, from the fundamental phase to industrial application, to encourage continuity of funding and support for projects throughout their development cycle.

These shared priorities enable us to coordinate our actions to better support researchers, universities and businesses in the development of projects, while strengthening our region's capacity to innovate and position itself as a major player in Europe.

What role do you intend to give to research and innovation in stimulating the economy, employment and industry in Wallonia?

Research and innovation play a central role in the strategy to revive and transform the Walloon economy. However, to maximise their impact, an in-depth reform of the

innovation landscape is needed.

In particular, this reform must involve streamlining the competitiveness clusters, clusters and incubators, with the aim of achieving efficiency. It is essential that this reorganisation is guided by the concrete needs of businesses. By putting businesses on the front line, we can better tailor public support to their realities and day-to-day challenges.

Another fundamental aim is to create an environment where innovative businesses can develop rapidly, without being held back by excessive bureaucracy. Flexibility and responsiveness must be at the heart of our approach, because they are essential if innovation is to really bear fruit.

To make the system easier to understand and simpler, we need to reduce administrative obstacles and make the processes for accessing support clearer and more straightforward. By streamlining procedures, we will enable innovation to grow unhindered, thereby helping to boost employment and strengthen industry in Wallonia.

How do you plan to facilitate the transfer of research results to businesses?

The reform of the research and innovation landscape aims to reorganise the operation of the competitiveness clusters, whose very purpose is to facilitate these transfers. By improving coordination between research and industry players, we are ensuring that scientific discoveries find their way to industrial application more quickly.

We want to promote access for businesses to research infrastructures, as this remains a major obstacle, especially for small structures. By supporting initiatives that enable these companies to work more closely with research centres, we are facilitating their access to cutting-edge technologies.

We are also working to encourage the creation of spin-offs from research. This means providing greater support for funding, incubation and mentoring mechanisms, to make it easier for researchers to become entrepreneurs. These spin-offs are often key vectors for technology transfer.

Finally, promoting a genuine culture of innovation is essential. We need to make researchers more aware of the value of their work and encourage them to explore collaborations with industry. This requires a change in mentality, with training and mentoring programmes to help them develop a more entrepreneurial approach.

What sector-wide research projects do you intend to support?

To support the competitiveness of our economy, we need to encourage research projects that are fully consistent with our industrial and economic policies, targeting each link in the value chains. The idea is to maximise the impact of innovations by ensuring that the results of research are transformed into concrete applications for our businesses and key sectors.

We will therefore continue to invest in strategic sectors such as the energy transition, digital technologies, health and industry. In the digital field, projects linked to artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and the digitalisation of industrial processes will also be a priority, as these technologies are transforming our industries and strengthening their competitiveness on an international scale.

Finally, it is vital to strengthen partnerships between businesses, research centres and universities to encourage open innovation and the emergence of new solutions in these sectors. By ensuring coherence at all levels, we are enabling these projects to develop harmoniously and have a significant impact on our economy and society.

What are the strategic sectors identified by the Walloon Government?

Wallonia needs to establish itself as a dynamic and innovative player, capable of meeting technological challenges. It's time to reinvent our economic model by incorporating the latest technological advances and supporting businesses in the digital and industrial sectors.

We have a fabric of dynamic SMEs, and sectors such as aerospace, healthcare and agri-food are growing fast, not to mention biotechnology, aeronautics, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence and defence.

It is essential to focus our resources on initiatives with high potential. We need to give these companies the means to grow rapidly and connect to international markets. We want a Wallonia that stands out for its boldness, its spirit of innovation, and that creates an environment conducive to the development of businesses, be they start-ups, scale-ups, SMEs or multinationals.

What are your industrial strategy and the opportunities offered by European regulations on state aid to support the development of

Wallonia's industrial capacity?

Our strategy is based on the ambition to strengthen Wallonia's industrial capacity while remaining competitive at European level. One crucial point is not to impose additional constraints on our companies that would not be required at European level. We note that some companies, whether French, German or from other neighbouring countries, comply with European regulations to the strict minimum. Why, in Wallonia, should we add extra layers of constraints? This could penalise our companies by creating a form of unfair competition.

We want a strong and dynamic industrial policy. It is not by being overcautious or asking too many questions that we will succeed in supporting the development of our economic fabric. Other countries do not hesitate to make full use of the room for manoeuvre offered by the European Union, and we must do the same. We must not be 'more Catholic than the Pope' by applying stricter rules than those imposed by Europe, because this unnecessarily handicaps our businesses in relation to their competitors.



© Pierre-Yves Jeholet's cabinet