

An interview with Mr Adrien DOLIMONT,

Minister-President of Wallonia,

Minister for the Budget, Finance, Research and Animal Welfare

How can research contribute to improving animal welfare in Wallonia?

The Regional Policy Statement 2024-2029 mentions support for laboratories to move towards a reduction in the use of experimental animals. I see this as a great opportunity to put in place a balanced measure in this area. It seems essential to continue to support scientific and medical discoveries, even if adequate alternatives are not yet available. In all cases, the aim must be to strike a balance between ethical progress, scientific advances and practical constraints, with a view to continuing to advance medicine while continuing to reduce animal suffering as far as possible.





Can you give us a few examples of research projects supported by the Walloon Government?

There are many examples, but the current unstable geopolitical context highlights the importance of supporting R&D in the defence sector. The Walloon region has a strong industrial base in this sector, which is a strategic asset. The Walloon Recovery Plan has already mobilised resources and 7 collaborative R&D projects between large companies and SMEs have been funded to the tune of €34 million. These projects have made it possible to investigate themes that are also reflected in the new call for proposals from the European Defence Fund.

Another important project concerns cybersecurity, an essential element of our strategy. In this sector, the Walloon recovery plan has made it possible to finance a structuring collaborative project, with a budget of €28 million.

When it comes to AI technologies, Wallonia cannot be left behind. That's why the ARIAC project (Applications and Research for Trusted Artificial Intelligence) has been funded to the tune of €32 million. This structuring project brings together the 5 universities of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (FWB) and 4 accredited research centres: Cénaéro, CETIC, Multitel and Sirris. Its objective is to develop AI research on subjects that correspond to the collective needs of Walloon businesses. Another objective is to create an online platform integrating the various software building blocks resulting from the research work, which will be made available to businesses.

In addition, ARIAC is a pillar of the TRAIL initiative, which brings together all the Walloon players in the field of AI and is supported by a Strategic Innovation Initiative (SII)

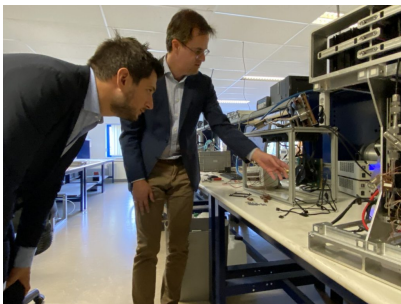
stemming from Wallonia's Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3).

Another important sector in which Wallonia is active is decarbonisation. The Walloon Recovery Plan has funded research initiatives to help industry decarbonise and develop cutting-edge technologies for recycling metals and construction materials. Around €700 million of the Recovery Plan was earmarked for research activities.

What resources and mechanisms are you using to support Wallonia's research players?

The budget of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation amounts to around €250 million, in addition to the part of the universities' allocation earmarked for research, giving a total of €450 million. The vast majority of this budget is earmarked for research in higher education establishments, and €180 million of this €250 million is channelled through the *Fondation d'utilité publique du F.R.S.-FNRS*.

The Walloon Region has a budget of €260 million, which is made available to companies, universities and colleges either through calls for proposals or on the basis of applications submitted for tools available on the SPWEER (Walloon Public Service Economy, Employment, Research) website.



What is your view of the regional research ecosystem?

Wallonia has a rich research ecosystem with leading players. We must continue to

support and develop it by concentrating our resources on identified strategic sectors, building up research centres and strengthening their presence in European research and innovation framework programmes (Horizon Europe).

Innovation is at the heart of the Walloon project and the Government's ambitions. Research and innovation are the backbone of our ambitions. To achieve its objectives, the Government has made a clear choice: to put an end to policies that spread public resources too thinly and to concentrate efforts and resources on strategic sectors for the Region, those of the Intelligent Specialisation Strategy (S3).

The three priority objectives identified for this legislature are to simplify administrative procedures, make support for research more efficient by revising the Research Decree, and clarify the innovation ecosystem with Minister Jeholet.

How are you encouraging Walloon players to take part in European research programmes?

Improving the European performance of our research players requires a favourable framework and in-depth reflection.

Broadly speaking, the actions deployed can be summed up in four stages: anticipating European trends and preparing the ground at regional level; influencing the approach through comitology; guiding and encouraging through information and support; setting up and managing projects/partnerships.

At present, the anticipation and influence stages through comitology need to be improved, particularly in terms of steering, coordination and strategy. For the information and guidance stage, it is important to clarify everyone's role. Finally, the setting up of projects is encouraged via the Horizon Europe bonus in Wallonia and the funding of Europe's units in Universities and Hautes Ecoles in the French Community. All these mechanisms and tools are currently being reviewed or evaluated, and they are one of my priorities.



What improvements do you think need to be made to the framework conditions to stimulate the freedom of basic and applied research in Wallonia?

With a view to encouraging the free development of research, one of the areas of work concerns the careers of researchers, for which the Community policy statement has two objectives.

Firstly, to make it possible for the most internationally competitive professors and researchers to free themselves from a majority of their teaching load in order to concentrate on research and contribute to the development of Walloon leadership.

Secondly, to review the status of university scientific and research staff with a view, among other things, to providing for the possibility of differentiated careers and encouraging research stays abroad.

The aim of research funded by Wallonia is to contribute to its economic development and to respond to societal challenges. This is why the majority of research resources in Wallonia are directed towards applied research in fields identified as strategic and priorities for the Region.

To improve the framework conditions, two main DPR projects have been initiated. The first project deals with the revision of the Walloon research decree to better respond to current priorities and needs, to have a flexible decree tool and to enable Walloon research to contribute to Wallonia's economic development and societal challenges. The second project concerns the consolidation of research centres by thematic groupings in order to strengthen expertise, achieve critical mass and also improve the transfer of results to businesses.