An interview with Mr. Anthony VAN PUTTE

Managing Director of the MecaTech cluster

What are the MecaTech cluster’s international missions?

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The MecaTech cluster’s mission is to create an industrial dynamic that generates jobs by supporting technological innovation projects for Walloon companies, research centres and universities. The emphasis is on developing collaborative industrial and commercial projects with an international dimension. The MecaTech cluster’s international positioning reflects this objective. Its international actions aim to increase the value of approved innovation projects outside the borders of Wallonia, to create opportunities for international partnerships for its members, to mobilise international financial resources for their projects and to contribute to the establishment or strengthening of foreign investment in Wallonia, all in partnership with AWEX.

What are the MecaTech cluster’s priority areas of expertise?

The engineering sciences encompass a wide range of cross-disciplinary technologies and know-how affecting almost every sector of activity: consumer products, medical equipment, industrial machinery and processes, energy production, etc. However, over the last few years, lines of force have emerged, and certain themes have achieved

significant critical mass, which is reflected, among other things, in the size of the MecaTech cluster's portfolio of innovation projects in these fields. Five non-exclusive industry ecosystems have been selected by the MecaTech cluster to tailor its expertise to the needs of its members:

- MedTech
- Sustainable Energy
- Circular Economy
- Defence & Security
- Industry 5.0

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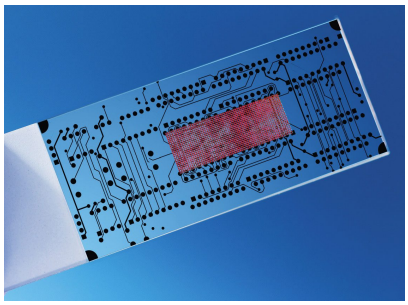
An innovation-friendly ecosystem for a better international visibility

With a network of over 400 members, the MecaTech cluster stands out for its ability to build bridges between Walloon innovation and international ecosystems. Its International Unit, dedicated to support and networking, makes it a privileged partner for companies wishing to innovate and develop on European and world markets.

The MecaTech cluster: a Belgian pioneer in European 'Cascade Funding' projects for Walloon

SMEs

Since its creation, the MecaTech cluster has been actively involved in promoting Walloon innovations in Europe and beyond. Its actions are aimed at establishing strategic international partnerships enabling Walloon SMEs to integrate into European ecosystems and access funding opportunities. Today, the MecaTech cluster is a key player in cascade financing, a European model for providing financial support for local innovation projects through simplified calls for projects for SMEs. This model has already benefited numerous companies, notably through the IoT4Industry, DREAM and GEMSTONE projects.



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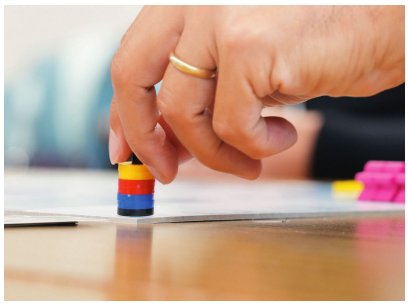

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The role of the MecaTech cluster’s International Unit

The cluster’s International Unit is dedicated to supporting Walloon companies in their internationalisation drive. Its mission is to offer personalised support in obtaining European funding and to help SMEs integrate into European innovation networks. Thanks to a constant watch on innovation and funding opportunities and tailor-made assistance in preparing applications, the Unit also facilitates strategic international collaborations.

The MecaTech cluster is a partner in two European ‘Cascade Funding’ projects: DREAM and GEMSTONE

DREAM project: adopting digital technologies for the manufacturing industry

The DREAM (Digital Resilient Europe for Advanced Manufacturing) project, launched in 2022, has brought together several European clusters, including the MecaTech cluster, to promote digital technologies in the manufacturing industry. This project has funded 35 innovation projects aimed at accelerating the adoption of AI, intelligent robotics and cyber security in industrial processes. Nearly a third of these projects (11 projects involving 12 Walloon companies) came from the Walloon ecosystem, testifying to Wallonia’s significant involvement in the digital transformation of industry. DREAM officially ended in August 2024.

GEMSTONE project: direct support for green and sustainable industry

GEMSTONE, launched in September 2023, is coordinated by the CIMES cluster (Rhône-Alpes, France) and brings together clusters from several European countries, including the MecaTech cluster. This project focuses on ‘Green Manufacturing’ and directly supports SMEs through lump-sum funding to encourage the development of environmentally-friendly solutions. In 2023, four cascade funding calls have been opened, including:

- **GREENINNOV** for the prototyping of green manufacturing solutions (€60,000/SME); three Walloon companies have received funding.
- **GREENADOPT** for the adoption of green solutions by industry (€40,000/SME consortium), with the selection of three Walloon companies.
- **TRAIN** for training in Green Manufacturing (€2,000/SME).
- **EXPLORE** for international exploratory missions (€1,500/SME), both open until 31 December 2024.

A strategic roadmap and a catalogue of events and training courses related to Green Manufacturing are also available to partners, facilitating access to essential resources for launching green projects.

WALHUB: accelerating the digital transformation of Walloon manufacturing companies. An EDIH for Wallonia!

WALHUB, the European Digital Innovation Hub for Wallonia, helps manufacturing companies with their digital transition by providing access to technology demonstrators, Living Labs and networking events between technology providers and industry. The MecaTech cluster plays a central role in coordinating the funding and coordination activities of the ecosystem. This project, launched in 2022, complements the 'Digital Wallonia' strategy by strengthening the digital skills of Walloon companies in the manufacturing sector.

The MecaTech cluster's International Unit offers much more

he International Unit goes beyond traditional support missions by helping member companies to develop international relations and attract European funding. It organises and participates in strategic international trade fairs and events, enabling Walloon SMEs to meet potential partners and boost their international profile. The Unit's activities also include finding partners for collaborative projects and supporting the integration of European innovation networks. Through these actions, MecaTech enables its members to seize growth opportunities in foreign markets. In 2024, the International Unit continued to expand its international network for the benefit of its members by organising missions abroad, particularly in France (Paris, Lille), Germany (Würzburg, Berlin), the Nordic countries and Canada.

Commitment to greener industry: the HECO2 and Circular Wallonia initiatives

The MecaTech cluster is actively involved in strategic regional initiatives to reduce CO2 emissions and promote the circular economy, such as the HECO2 portfolio of projects and the Circular Wallonia initiative. These projects are in line with the guidelines of the Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) and strengthen Wallonia's positioning as an innovative and sustainable region.

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