

Interview with Mr Mark ANDRIES,

General Administrator for Flanders Innovation & Entrepreneurship (VLAIO)

What services do you provide to entrepreneurs?

VLAIO is the agency of entrepreneurship and innovation of the government of Flanders. Its clients are the companies in Flanders. Thanks to our own front office, we can answer their questions, deliver guidance, send advisors to the company's location to discuss business cases as a whole and innovation in particular, and match them with the relevant members of our network of partners. On top of that we can give companies in Flanders some basic advice on intellectual property, a key aspect of innovation, and we also provide them with financial support for their projects, be it directly or indirectly via other Flemish agencies. Since we have a wide portfolio of grants and subsidies, most of the financial support to companies is given by VLAIO. Subsidies can be granted to professionalize the staff of SMEs or help their growth; they can also be allocated to bigger companies wishing to make an investment to reduce their ecological footprint. Last but not least, our subsidies are mostly focused on R&D and innovation. And let us not forget the fact that VLAIO is an internationally oriented agency: as such, we are the coordinator of the European Regional Fund for Development in Flanders and we also act as contact point for European subsidies in the framework of Horizon Europe and other European research programmes.



How do you help foreign entrepreneurs and investors to establish or expand business in Flanders?

This task is carried out in close collaboration with FIT (Flanders Investment & Trade): with about hundred officers around the world, FIT enjoys a strong connection with potential foreign investors. When one of them shows interest to settle down in Flanders, VLAIO and FIT join hands to give that potential foreign investor advice and provide him with the right partner. In terms of advice VLAIO proves to be a privileged partner considering the amount of information we have about subsidies for investments. Since foreign companies are often willing to carry out R&D activities in Flanders, VLAIO can connect them with universities and other knowledge institutions. We can also help them to find a location with the close cooperation of municipalities, project developers, realtors and (air) port authorities.

What support do you offer for research & development?

We offer direct financial support for R&D activities and encourage companies to collaborate with universities and other institutions and/or companies. This incentive is in no way compulsory but it remains interesting given that R&D is a hazardous process: it can fail to yield the expected business results. That is why cooperation enables risk sharing while subsidies encourage risk taking by companies.

There are two kinds of subsidies. The first one covers research projects with a lower TRL, i.e. a focus on knowledge generation that implies a bigger support; higher development projects with a higher TRL, closer to the market and therefore less risky (which implies a smaller support); joint projects between companies or between companies and universities; and incentives for PhD students and postdocs to work in a company (this incentive has been very successful over the last years). The second kind of subsidies is related to the various European networks (Eurostars, European partnerships, Eureka...) in which VLAIO funds Flemish players in international consortia supporting international collaboration and creating a leverage to European cofunding. In addition, in its function as national contact point, VLAIO guides companies to join European programmes such as Horizon Europe.



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How do you help innovation clusters in Flanders to increase their competitiveness?

Clusters are an important instrument to promote cooperation and innovation within the same value chain. We mainly support six spearhead clusters: Catalisti (sustainable chemistry), Flanders Food, VIL (logistics), Flux50 (energy innovation), Blue Cluster (economy and innovation in the North Sea) and the youngest one, Medvia (healthcare innovation). VLAIO grants subsidies for cluster projects. For instance, Blue Cluster has recently launched the project Blue Marine with the aim to develop technologies for growing plants in the North Sea: these sea farms are interesting for various sectors, such as the pharmaceutical industry and the textile industry. Thanks to this project, different sectors work together via a very innovative, atypical approach which can benefit everyone. VLAIO also supports smaller innovative business clusters (eleven at the moment), which are bottom-up initiatives launched by companies active in drones, offshore energy, etc.

Recent developments

During the COVID-19 crisis, VLAIO played an active role in supporting enterprises by providing funding to help alleviate the immediate financial impact. As the crisis came to an end, the focus shifted from mitigating its impact to relaunching and recovering the economy. To this end, VLAIO managed several projects under the Flemish Resilience Plan, partly funded through the European Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF), and launched calls under the RePowerEU initiative.

At present, Flanders actively supports the transition to a low-emission economy, sustainability, digitisation and related goals, while also focusing on mission-oriented approaches. VLAIO has provided funding for projects in European value chains in the context of the Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEI), supporting industrial transitions. It has also committed support to the European Chips Joint Undertaking, with a major Pilot Plant in Flanders as a flagship project.



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New funding formats

VLAIO played an active role in the framework to support Flemish companies affected by rising energy prices and is currently working on new funding formats, such as contracts for difference, in which funding is determined by the level of emission reduction achieved. In addition, VLAIO has launched several initiatives to integrate innovation in the defence sector into its instruments, supports SMEs in digitisation and cybersecurity, and has launched a major initiative on climate mitigation. In this latter initiative, it integrates the above-mentioned contracts for difference into a broader approach aimed at reconciling climate ambitions with the competitiveness of our industry.

International orientation

Finally, VLAIO has also invested in strengthening its international orientation. In 2026, VLAIO holds the presidency of TAFTIE, a network of European innovation agencies. It also contributes to the Belgian presidency of Eureka in 2026–2027, a network focused on joint funding for R&D in international projects. In addition, it chairs the Public Authority Board of the Chips JU.

