Interview with Prof. Dr. Ir. Peter Schelkens,

Vice-Rector Innovation and Valorisation

VUB TechTransfer works continuously to connect the university's research expertise with the needs of industry and society.

"When I was appointed Vice-Rector, I found myself in a fortunate position—the services under this vice-rectorate were already functioning at a high level. They manage innovation projects, handle the university's intellectual property, and assist researchers with obtaining project funding, patenting innovations, licensing, and launching spin-offs," explains Prof. Dr. Ir. Peter Schelkens, Vice-Rector Innovation and Valorisation at the VUB.

Vice-Rector Peter Schelkens. © Greetje Van Buggenhout / VUB

"One of my main responsibilities is to ensure that the knowledge generated through our research finds its way to the market. This requires frequent engagement with the industrial sector and intense collaboration with strategic research centres like imec, VIB, Flanders Make and VITO. Also, fundamental research is regularly influenced by insights originating from contacts with industry.

With deep expertise, the VUB TechTransfer team supports research teams in translating their cutting-edge research into practical solutions and enabling such economic and societal valorisation.

"We help bridge the gap between academic innovation and industrial needs, guiding researchers to align their work with real-world challenges. These collaborations generate societal and economic impact, and the revenue they produce is reinvested into strengthening research excellence."

Research parks

The Vice-Rectorate also supports incubation of startup companies and invests in research parks that can host innovative companies.

“VUB invests significantly in Research Park Zellik, with the goal to create a thriving ecosystem for companies focussing on robotics, AI, health technology and sustainable energy products. The Zellik park already hosts a sustainably managed data centre, cooled using collected rainwater and partially powered by solar cells. From Q1 2026 onwards it will also host the new Flemish supercomputer where residual heat is channelled to a local heating network.”

“The university also co-founded with ULB several incubation centres such as ICAB and StartLab.Brussels and more recently – with the Flemish Biotechnology Institute (VIB) – the pre-Bio-Incubator Brussels (BIB), all on or in the vicinity of the University Campus in Etterbeek.”

Spin-offs and European Leadership

More than fifty spin-offs have emerged from VUB research.

“That’s a strong figure for a university of our size. One standout example is data management company Collibra, which became Belgium’s first ‘unicorn’ spin-off, i.e. with a market value exceeding one billion euros or Ablynx, a VUB-VIB spin-off that produces therapeutic nanobody molecules. In terms of securing EU project funding, we’re among the top twenty in terms of yearly funding budgets.”

New challenges for academic researchers

“Due to the changed geopolitical situation, the academic world is facing considerable societal challenges in areas such as knowledge security, defence research, and cybersecurity. Europe needs to become more self-reliant.”

“This evolution is prompting Europe to release more funding for research with practical military applications—something the United States has done for much longer. Within this context, academic freedom remains invaluable—so does the ethical dimension of our work. We must constantly reflect on the nature and aims of our research. We have a societal responsibility to ask ourselves: What are the consequences of my collaborations? What happens to my research outcomes? What do I communicate – and what do I withhold?”

“Where open science was once the standard, the paradigm is now shifting to: ‘as open as possible, as secure as necessary.’ This requires a careful balance between transparency and protection.”

Evolving Regulatory Landscape

The European Commission is increasingly imposing regulations on knowledge security and privacy—such as GDPR and export controls.

“Additional rules are also emerging, including the AI Act, the Medical Device Regulation, cybersecurity frameworks, and stricter oversight on military research. To prevent researchers and committees from becoming overwhelmed, we provide clear guidance and support so everyone can navigate this complex regulatory environment more smoothly.”

About Peter Schelkens

Peter Schelkens obtained his degree in electronic engineering from the Industriële Hogeschool Antwerpen-Mechelen in 1991. He later earned an MSc in electrical engineering (applied physics, 1994), a postgraduate degree in biomedical engineering technologies (specializing in medical physics, 1995), and a PhD in applied sciences (2001), all from the VUB.

His research focuses on multidimensional signal processing, particularly digital holography, for which he received an ERC Consolidator Grant. Schelkens is active in JPEG standardization and has held leadership roles in this area. He co-edited The JPEG 2000 Suite and Optical and Digital Image Processing, and has held roles within IEEE and Eurasip.

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