An interview with Mr Jean-François HEUSE

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What are the missions of the Department of Research and Technological Development?



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With a budget of nearly 500 million € in 2023, the department is the main provider of funds in Wallonia for R&D units: companies, whatever their size, research centres, universities and university colleges.

To do this, we have two mechanisms, within a general system called ‘Win4research’: ‘window’ aid (which are our own programmes) or collaborative programmes (those in which Wallonia participates with other funding agencies, especially in an international framework). I would also add the financing of projects of competitiveness clusters when the latter launch their own calls.

In addition to this first mission, we also accompany these research players. How do we do this? We help them, for example, to file a patent, to promote their research…

And thirdly, there are awareness-raising actions and public understanding of Science through the Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) strategy

supported by the Walloon Government, competitions such as L'Odyssée de l'objet, CANSAT or the publication of a magazine for 40 years, Athena.

Could you tell us about the research support mechanisms for these Walloon research actors?

As I was saying, on the one hand, there is the "window aid". This aid takes the form of a grant or a repayable loan and varies in intensity according to the size of the company and the qualification of the research (industrial research or experimental development).

Unlike universities, which are financed at 100%, or research centres (75%), the regulations on State aid do not allow us such rates for companies. In concrete terms, this means that a company that has a project to finance submits it to us, we analyze it and, if relevant, grant financial aid.



© SPW Research - Former European Commissioner for Research, Iliana Ivanova's opening speech at INDTECH 2024, at the Théâtre de Namur (BE). This event gathered about 450 attendees.

On the other hand, there are calls. These are of two types: regional and international. In this case, the department launches, alone or with the support of the European Commission, calls for proposals. They can be thematic or non-thematic. A timetable is set: a launch date, a cut-off date and the evaluation and ranking processes are specified.

The international calls allow, as their name indicates, Walloon R&D actors to have an opening towards external markets and collaborations that they might not have internally.

Finally, I would also like to mention more specific aids, such as those which allow the creation of spin-offs, or which offer companies the possibility of hiring a (post)doctoral student.



2024 was also an important year for Belgium with the presidency of the European Council.

That’s true! During the first half of the year, Belgium chaired the Council of the European Union. The last time was in 2010 and the next one is not planned until 2035 or 2036! For the first time, Wallonia had the lead in Research. This means that the department, in collaboration with other relevant administrations, participated in the intra-Belgium discussions, led by the Belgian Permanent Representation to the European Union and the ministry of Foreign Affairs, but also took part in ad hoc inter-ministerial committees. Many working groups were set up and, here again, the department chaired them.

And concretely, what are the results of this Belgian presidency in terms of R&D or the points you want to highlight?

The conclusions of the European Council on the exploitation of research results and on the report of the Horizon 2020 framework programme, drawn up by the officials of the Public Service of Wallonia, were adopted by the Research Working Group in March and then officially at the formal Council in May, by the European research ministers. We can be proud of it! It was a huge work…

During the month of April, several major events of the presidency took place. The European Research and Innovation Area (ERAC) Committee meeting took place in Namur to discuss their views on the next research framework programme. In parallel to this meeting, the European research attachés also met in Namur.

Later in April, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions 2024 conference was held in Mons. The theme of this conference was the different careers that researchers can pursue. Many experts in the field shared their advice and experiences with researchers, representatives of the public and private sectors, policy-makers and stakeholders present during these two days, through round tables or parallel sessions. In the end, the conference was a real success: 252 participants from all over the world and all sectors, against 150 initially expected.

Finally, in June, another major conference, INDTECH2024 (Conference on Industrial Technologies), organized by the SPW Research and co-financed by the Commission, saw over 450 participants from stakeholders from research organizations, industry, SMEs, but also academic representatives to discuss the latest developments, technological challenges and future trends in industrial technologies.

In parallel to the conference, two other venues in Namur were used as exhibition spaces for Belgian or European research organizations and EU-funded projects so that they could present their activities and results in a pleasant setting.

What are the projects for 2025?

First, we will contact our new cabinet from the elections of June 2024. We will then present various notes of intent, including on the European partnerships in which we would like to get involved. Then the course of things will resume, interrupted by this presidency that I have just mentioned.



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