Nicolas Durand – CEO, Fondation Campus Biotech Geneva

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Nicolas Durand, CEO of Fondation Campus Biotech Geneva, shares insights into the foundation's unique role as a catalyst for neuroscience and digital health innovation in Switzerland. In this interview, Durand discusses the foundation's collaborative model, the importance of building critical mass in a specialised domain, and how Fondation Campus Biotech is working to bridge the gap between academic research and industrial application.

Could you briefly introduce yourself and share your current responsibilities?

I studied microengineering at EPFL and have been an engineer by passion since my student days. As a child, I dreamed of becoming either an astronaut or an entrepreneur. Although opportunities to become an astronaut in Switzerland were limited, I was fortunate to participate in microgravity parabolic flights with the European Space Agency. I also hold a pilot's licence and compete in aerobatics at the Swiss championships, where I have won four titles in different categories over the past five years.

My entrepreneurial journey began at age 14, when I founded my first IT company. That experience inspired me to pursue a PhD in an EPFL laboratory renowned for its deep-tech spinouts, where I connected with fellow entrepreneurs. During my thesis I developed a rapid-diagnostic technology, which led me to co-found Abionic. For the past 15 years I have led Abionic in creating a one-drop

blood test for rapid sepsis diagnosis that saves lives each week. The name “Abionic” combines “AB” for visibility in directories, “bio” for biology, and “nic” from my name, Nicolas.

After fifteen years at Abionic, I was ready for a new challenge, and just over a year ago I became CEO of Fondation Campus Biotech Geneva. In addition to this role, I serve on the boards of Economiesuisse and the Chambre Vaudoise du Commerce et de l’Industrie. I also sit on several association boards to help improve the conditions for entrepreneurship in Switzerland. For me, it is essential not only to highlight systemic challenges but to adopt a hands-on approach in addressing them.

Can you introduce Fondation Campus Biotech Geneva?

Campus Biotech is a unique research campus in Geneva focused on neuroscience, neurotechnology, and digital health. It was established in 2013 on the former Merck Serono site hence the “Biotech” name then reimagined as a public–private initiative to preserve Geneva’s life-science footprint. Today, we host scientists from EPFL, the University of Geneva, and the Geneva University Hospitals (HUG) alongside the Wyss Center and HEPIA, bringing more than 60 principal investigators and over 1,200 staff together under one roof.

Our core mission is to accelerate brain-related research and innovation. To achieve this, we operate eight shared scientific platforms that pool high-cost equipment—such as a world-class MRI system and Switzerland’s only magnetoencephalography facility—so that academic groups, startups, and industry partners can access these resources affordably. By fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and providing cutting-edge infrastructure, we act as a catalyst for breakthroughs in understanding and treating neurological disorders.

What are the key metrics you use to measure the success and impact of Campus Biotech?

At Campus Biotech, we use a combination of quantitative and qualitative indicators to assess our success and impact. We currently host around 1,200 people on-site across 40,000 square metres of infrastructure, with more than half dedicated to laboratories and experimental spaces. The campus supports over 60 active research groups and is home to three National Centres of Competence in Research—Synapsy, Evolving Language, and Emotions—which we actively promote.

Scientific output is a strong metric for us, with over 200 peer-reviewed publications produced by our community. Entrepreneurship is also a key focus, and we currently support approximately 30 startups. In addition, we're proud to host several major innovation and support organisations such as FONGIT, BioAlps, Genilem, and GESDA, which plays a unique role in technology anticipation and diplomacy. Our ecosystem also offers a wide range of services in intellectual property, market access, and regulatory affairs—further reinforcing our role as a dynamic hub for innovation and translational science.

How would you position Campus Biotech within Switzerland's broader life sciences ecosystem?

I view myself as an enabler of patient impact – that concept drives both my career and our mission. Fundamental research is valuable, but its true purpose is to deliver tangible benefits to patients. To that end, we are expanding clinical activities and nurturing startups, since these young companies are essential for translating discoveries into market-ready solutions.

Switzerland may be a small country, but it hosts one of the world's most dynamic life sciences ecosystems, renowned for its strength in pharma, biotech, and medtech. Global clusters in Basel, Zurich, and Lausanne reflect this excellence. Within this landscape, Campus Biotech in Geneva stands out as both a national and international reference in neuroscience, neurotechnology, and digital health.

Unlike broader innovation hubs, Campus Biotech is not a generalist platform. It is a highly focused ecosystem operating at the intersection of brain science, engineering, and health. One of our key challenges—and opportunities—is to communicate this unique positioning more effectively.

A defining characteristic of Campus Biotech is the exceptional academic collaboration it enables. It is rare to find three leading institutions—EPFL, the University of Geneva, and HUG—co-located and deeply engaged in joint efforts to advance our understanding of the human brain. This academic core is now being complemented by clinical and translational activities that bring patients into the research and innovation pipeline.

The next phase of our development is to expand the presence of entrepreneurs and industry partners on site. We are about to inaugurate a new building designed specifically to host these actors, with the goal of fostering a vibrant, translational ecosystem that bridges science, care, and innovation. Strengthening national and international partnerships with both academic and

industrial stakeholders will be essential to this evolution.

In short, one of the most important differentiators of Campus Biotech is our translational mindset. Our ambition is clear: to generate research and innovation that have a real and positive impact on patients' lives.

Otsuka's Taiho recently acquired Araris, and we are seeing increased M&A activity, along with interest from leading funds. Do you see this as just the tip of the iceberg?

The recent acquisition of Araris by Otsuka's Taiho is a strong signal — not just about the quality of innovation in Switzerland, but also about the global visibility of our biotech ecosystem. It confirms that Swiss startups can generate cutting-edge science with clear translational value and become highly attractive targets for international investors and pharma companies.

I do believe this is just the tip of the iceberg. Switzerland has built deep scientific excellence over decades, and we're now seeing more entrepreneurial ambition, more translational infrastructures, and more interest from venture funds and corporations. Technological gems are everywhere in Switzerland, but in most cases, funding is lacking and most companies are struggling to succeed with their acquisition process.

We need to continue investing in the "connective tissue" of the ecosystem: funding mechanisms, translational platforms, talent development, and international collaboration.

Switzerland has a strong reputation in life sciences and biotech. How would you describe the current state of the ecosystem?

Switzerland's life sciences and biotech ecosystem is exceptionally strong and continues to evolve in promising directions. The country consistently ranks among the top global hubs for pharmaceutical innovation, medtech, and biotech, thanks to a combination of world-class research institutions, a robust regulatory environment, strong IP protection, and a high density of multinational companies.

One of Switzerland's greatest assets is its capacity of developing innovation, especially in the early-stage. We are among the best to generate ideas, intellectual property and develop technologies.

That said, our ecosystem is also facing some challenges. Early-stage and growing phases fundings can be a bottleneck for deep-tech and life-sciences ventures, and attracting international talent remains competitive. Accessing international markets in the commercialization phase is also a big challenge and Switzerland is so small that we can consider that it has almost no home market.

But overall, Switzerland offers an outstanding platform for life sciences innovation. And especially at Campus Biotech, we see strong momentum, especially in areas like brain health, neurotechnology, and digital therapeutics, where Switzerland can play a leading global role.

How does the Geneva area differentiate itself within Switzerland's life sciences landscape?

Switzerland's cantons each contribute distinct strengths to the life-sciences sector. In Lausanne, EPFL drives deep-tech innovation; Basel is the world's pharmaceutical capital; Valais focuses on ecological and energy technologies; and Neuchâtel specializes in microengineering, thanks to its watchmaking heritage. Geneva's unique edge, however, is in the broad "neuro" arena, neuroscience, neurotechnology, digital health, and global health innovation.

We recently opened an outpatient clinic in partnership with HUG and launched a dedicated health hub to attract more patients and clinical research. Our next priority is the new building now under construction, which will host startups, scale-ups, SMEs, and industry partners. This space will foster interaction and accelerate the translation of discoveries into patient-focused solutions.

Moreover, Geneva benefits from proximity to international organizations such as the World Health Organization and the International Telecommunication Union. Their presence gives our ecosystem a global perspective and policy relevance that few other regions can match. Together, these elements create a mission-driven, cross-disciplinary environment that is increasingly attracting startups, corporates, and investors.

What does Geneva need to do to remain competitive in the global life sciences sector?

Geneva has a unique value proposition in the life sciences but to remain competitive on the international stage, we need to address a few strategic priorities.

First and foremost, we need to strengthen support for innovation and translation. That means more targeted investment in translational infrastructures, clinical research capacity, and early-stage

funding for startups, especially in deep-tech and neurotechnology, where development timelines are longer and risks higher. Geneva's Minister of Economy, Mrs Delphine Bachmann has recently launched her "Innovation Master Plan", where Campus Biotech has a major role.

Second, talent attraction and retention are critical. Geneva offers an exceptional quality of life, but we also need to ensure the region is competitive in terms of career opportunities, housing, and support for dual-career families, especially for international researchers, entrepreneurs, and executives.

Third, we could benefit from greater coordination with the other key areas of Switzerland

Fourth, infrastructure needs attention, from lab space for scale-ups, to GMP manufacturing, to clinical trial coordination. If we want companies to grow here and stay here, we need to make sure the full innovation lifecycle is supported locally.

Finally, we should embrace Geneva's unique identity, as a place where science meets diplomacy, policy, and ethics. There's real opportunity to lead globally in responsible innovation, especially in areas like neuroethics, digital health governance, and global access to technology.

What initiatives are you currently undertaking to foster a more robust environment?

The greatest challenge to strengthening our ecosystem is cultural: in Switzerland, public funding ends once a project becomes a company. We support university research generously, but spinouts rarely qualify for government grants. While this principle ensures fiscal discipline, it also creates a gap that hinders the growth of our most promising ventures.

To begin addressing this, Campus Biotech has convened working groups with federal and cantonal authorities, academic leaders, and industry associations. We are hosting policy workshops and roundtables to showcase the value of targeted public-private funding for deep-tech startups. These forums highlight successful use cases and explore pilot funding schemes that could become models for wider adoption.

Changing mindsets and regulations will not happen overnight, but by fostering dialogue and demonstrating real-world impact, we are building momentum for the cultural and policy shifts that Switzerland needs to produce its next generation of world-leading companies.

For pharma and biotech ventures seeking rigorous development and strong academic support, Switzerland remains the best location. However, deep-tech and medical-device firms aiming for

rapid market entry often find the US more attractive, given its larger market and investor appetite. Each project must evaluate its own needs and target markets when choosing where to raise capital. The reality is that the optimal funding destination depends on a company's stage and its market focus.

Which organisations would you highlight as driving the most exciting innovations, and why?

I would highlight several companies and initiatives that exemplify the innovation happening here. Artiria Medical has developed a micro-catheter system that navigates the smallest cerebral vessels to remove clots in stroke patients. Patients often go home the same day with no lasting damage—an extraordinary advance in acute care. Gliapharm is pioneering therapeutics that target glial cells, a mechanism with great promise for Alzheimer's treatment. Neurosterix is focused on novel compounds for treating addiction, addressing a critical unmet need.

On the neuromodulation front, our researchers and partners are demonstrating that just two minutes of daily stimulation of the cerebellum can retrain dopaminergic pathways, providing relief from severe depression for up to six months. The concept is straightforward: by exciting the cerebellum, we activate the striatum's dopamine production, which is deficient in depressed patients.

You'll also find FONGIT, BioAlps, Genilem, Gesda (technology anticipation & diplomacy) ; so if you walked through Campus Biotech today, you wouldn't just see great science or great startups, you'd see an ecosystem that's alive, connected, and purpose-driven.

These examples, alongside leading academic centres and shared platforms, make Campus Biotech a living ecosystem where cutting-edge research and patient-focused innovation come together.

With the increasing integration of biotech, medtech, and digital health, how is Campus Biotech supporting cross-disciplinary collaboration?

Cross-disciplinary collaboration is at the core of Campus Biotech's DNA. From the beginning, the campus was designed to bring together experts from neuroscience, engineering, data science, medicine, and business, all under one roof, with a shared mission to improve brain health and human well-being.

As described previously, we support this integration by encouraging spontaneous exchange and collaboration, and by providing world-class technology platforms and services.

We also foster collaboration through joint projects, workshops, and thematic clusters, for example, around brain health, brain-computer interfaces, neurorehabilitation, or mental health innovation. These initiatives bring together engineers, clinicians, neuroscientists, and entrepreneurs to tackle problems from multiple angles.

The next phase is to increase connection between startups, academic researchers, clinicians and patients to accelerate validation and adoption.

In short, Campus Biotech is much more than just co-location, it’s a convergence hub, purpose-built to dissolve the traditional silos between disciplines and to create the conditions for innovation at the intersection of life sciences and technology.

How do you plan to further increase visibility and attract the next wave of innovative companies?

We employ a two-pronged strategy. First, we focus locally, positioning Campus Biotech as Geneva’s premier hub for high-tech innovation. We welcome home-grown startups that wish to join our community. Second, we actively reach out to leading global ventures, ensuring they understand that here they gain unmatched access to cutting-edge technologies and patient networks. Our deep specialization aligns perfectly with their needs, offering world-class facilities, visibility, and connections to partners and investors.

Is Switzerland doing enough to attract and retain top-tier life sciences talent? What initiatives are you implementing at Campus Biotech to strengthen the talent pipeline?

Switzerland is a fantastic place to live, and this has made it relatively easy for us to attract top talent. It is also a high-cost country, which means salaries are higher than in many other parts of Europe. For many professionals, this is an additional incentive to come here.

However, I do see a challenge when it comes to the political climate and how it could affect Switzerland’s openness in the future. There is an upcoming vote, either next year or the year after, that could have a real impact. Some voices are pushing to limit the population to ten million, which would mean restricting the arrival of people from abroad. I am personally against this initiative.

We must maintain strong ties with our European neighbours. We need people from the European Union to keep coming to Switzerland to work, particularly in our hospitals, research institutions, and industries. If we lose that access, if the bilateral agreements with the EU are put at risk—it could cause serious damage to the entire system. We must ensure that people understand how essential this international talent is to keeping our healthcare and innovation ecosystems functioning.

What are the next big priorities for Campus Biotech?

Our next big priority is to strengthen the international visibility and positioning of Campus Biotech. While we have built a strong foundation as a leading hub for neuroscience and digital health, this is still not widely recognized outside of Western Switzerland. Until now, we have focused on providing platforms and infrastructure for researchers, and those who are part of the ecosystem are very satisfied. However, we now need to go further and ensure that Campus Biotech is seen for what it truly is, one of the top centers for brain and neuro innovation in Europe.

We want to deepen our translational impact by expanding the community to include not only researchers but also patients and entrepreneurs. We are also working to reinforce our role in fast-evolving areas like neuromodulation, digital biomarkers, wearable neurotechnology, and AI-based analytics. Our infrastructure must continue to evolve to stay ahead of the curve, which includes exploring how to better integrate biomanufacturing capabilities and regulatory support.

Beyond these scientific and operational priorities, we must do a better job of telling our story. We want Campus Biotech to be on the global map, in competition with hubs like Boston, Paris and Shanghai, not just next-door regions like Lausanne, Basel or Zurich. The quality of research and innovation happening here is world-class, and we aim to attract more international collaborations, strategic investors, and top global talent. Raising our international profile is essential, and we are fully committed to making that happen.

If we were to check in with you in five years, what achievements would you hope to highlight?

First, I’d like to show you a stronger pipeline of successful startups and scale-ups that have emerged from our ecosystem, companies that succeeded having a positive and strong impact on patients, especially in neuroscience, mental health, neurorehabilitation, or digital health.

Second, I’d hope to demonstrate how we’ve accelerated clinical translation — by making it easier for researchers and entrepreneurs to validate their innovations in real-world settings, through stronger ties with hospitals, regulatory support, and patient engagement.

Third, I’d love to walk you through expanded and upgraded shared infrastructures with additional scientific platforms and AI tools that would be accessible to both academia and industry.

Fourth, I’d like to point to our international positioning, that Campus Biotech would be clearly recognized not only as a Swiss hub, but as a global reference in brain innovation. I’d want to show you new partnerships with leading institutions, investors, and corporations from around the world who see Campus Biotech as the place to be.

And finally, I’d hope we could celebrate how Campus Biotech has remained true to its mission: to be a place where brilliant minds collaborate to solve meaningful challenges, with science that serves society, innovation that improves lives, and a community that continues to grow with purpose.

That’s the kind of story I’d love to tell you in five years, and we’re working every day to make it a reality.

Any final words for our international audience out there?

At Campus Biotech, we believe that the future of health, especially brain health will be shaped at the intersection of science, technology, and humanity. That is the space we occupy: a unique ecosystem where world-class research connects with real-world impact.

To our international audience, I would like to say that we are open and eager to collaborate, particularly with industrial partners. If you are working on bold ideas in neuroscience, digital health, neurotechnology, or translational life sciences, and are looking for access to cutting-edge infrastructure or expert support, we would be more than happy to explore potential partnerships.

Whether you are a researcher, entrepreneur, investor, or policymaker, you will find not only facilities and know-how here in Geneva, but also a shared commitment to advancing innovation that truly matters. We are building more than a campus, we are building a community. And we would be delighted to have you be part of it.

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