

Interview: Giuseppe Martini - President, ALISEI, Italy



15.03.2016

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Giuseppe Martini, President at the National Technological Cluster: Advanced Life Sciences in Italy (ALISEI) discusses the founding of the ALISEI cluster, its main missions and how it helps Italy to promote itself as a research destination on a pan-European level.

Mr. Martini, can you give our readers a brief overview of how the concept of National Technological Cluster development (and specifically ALISEI) originally came about in 2012 and the scope of its mandate?

ALISEI is a technology cluster that was set up to foster interaction between public authorities, the business community, and universities, in one of the most strategic sectors for innovation and research in Italy – the healthcare sector.

In 2012, we identified a gap between scientific research and technology transfer where on the one hand academic research usually develops new knowledge and targeted therapies but is weak in terms of product development and on the other hand the pharmaceutical and biotech industries have expertise in the development of drugs and devices but limited access to new therapeutic concepts.

We developed the cluster basically as a tool to reduce this gap between academic and industrial research. In this sense, we act as a genuine facilitator and accelerator of knowledge and technology transfer from the field of multidisciplinary research in the biomedical-pharmaceutical

industry, leveraging on public sector and private research laboratories, advanced manufacturing facilities and high value-added services.

Who are your key stakeholders at ALISEI?

We really want to foster collaboration between stakeholders from different disciplines and transcend the boundaries between public health, academia and the private industry. This is made possible by a strategic bottom-up approach; the members are involved as an integral part, directly or indirectly, in the decision-making process on the objectives and the program of activities of the organization.

For the private sector, the industry associations such as Assobiotec, Assobiomedica, and Farindustria work with us. We have four national research centers on board as well, including the National Council of Research (CNR) and the Italian Institute of Technology (IIT). The Ministry of Economy supervises the latter, which is interesting because it allows us to have direct access and interaction with people on a governmental level. And lastly, the regional governments have to indicate which territorial or regional entities are most appropriate to be part of ALISEI.

ALISEI is formally recognized by the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research and the cluster aims to promote Italian participation in the European Research programs and enforce international networking.

Naturally, we faced challenges when we created the cluster, for example, projects financed by the Ministry need to go through extremely complicated procedures. Thus it took a considerable amount of time until the projects were on track from a financial point of view. However, they are now running smoothly and in good shape.

Can you please give an overview of the 4 flagship projects currently underway:

‘Ivascomar,’ ‘Iirmi,’ ‘Medintech,’ and ‘DNA on Disk’?

The Ivascomar project focuses on identifying, validating and commercially developing both diagnostic and prognostic biomarkers for Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s diseases, multiple sclerosis and diabetes, all chronic, high incidence and high social cost diseases. The synergy created by the various players involved generated a sort of “research industry” where research bodies and universities produce a pipeline of molecules that are then validated as biomarkers by companies. The project leader is Dompè and partners include the Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele and the Fondazione Centro San Raffaele.

The IRMI Project will favor transfer of research studies performed by major Italian universities into products approved for human use; it will make it possible to treat expensive chronic diseases at considerably lower costs for the national health system and introduce new, more effective and cheaper treatments into clinical practice. The project leader is the Maria Pia Hospital and partners include for example the Istituto Ortopedico Rizzoli and the Università di Torino

A group of internationally recognized researchers from universities and business are cooperating in the MEDINTECH project to create an Italian technological platform aimed at developing research on new molecules for preventing infection and treating autoimmune disease. The project leader is GSK, working together with Università degli Studi di Milano and Primm, amongst others.

The objective of the DNA ON DISK project is to research, develop and prototype new low-cost hybrid silicon-plastic devices to bridge that gap, capitalizing on progress in microelectronics, microfluidics, and MEMS to develop advanced platforms in in-vitro molecular diagnostics. The project is lead by STMicroelectronics, partnering with Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche and Clonit, amongst others.

What is the next step for ALISEI?

Over the last two years we have put a lot of effort into establishing a solid structure for our organization. We are now at a point where we are recognized as a serious entity, which raises curiosity at a national as well as international level.

Going forward, we need to keep our activities on a strategic level and act as a strategic think tank, especially since there is no such think tank in Italy, let alone in the healthcare sector. Nowadays, politics also pays attention to scientific research, compared to ten years ago. There is a shift in thinking, from perceiving healthcare as a cost to seeing it as an investment.

The real mission of ALISEI is to identify projects of considerable scale that we as a country can pursue, taking into account our country-specific characteristics. This will make it much easier to be perceived as a valuable partner in Horizon 2020, the biggest EU Research and Innovation program ever. Of course, we also have to think beyond Horizon 2020 and identify opportunities, partners and available sources for funding.

We are almost at a point where we can sustain ourselves as an entity, which is important because if we do not become independent we will depend on politics; something that we clearly do not want in the future.

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