Paul Herijgers – Dean of Faculty of Medicine, KU Leuven, Belgium



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Paul Herijgers, dean of the faculty of medicine at leading Belgian university KU Leuven, outlines the collaborative research projects the university is undertaking and its role within the wider Belgian innovation ecosystem.

Could you introduce yourself as dean of the faculty of medicine but also the KU Leuven and the faculty of medicine?

I have been with KU Leuven since 1998 when I became a researcher and professor for the university, with a curriculum in cardiac surgery and more specific expertise in heart valve surgery. In the past, I have also been a chairman of the department of cardiovascular sciences at KU Leuven and then in 2016 I was elected as dean of the Faculty of Medicine.

KU Leuven is a comprehensive university of the Flemish region of Belgium. It is actually the most innovative university in Europe according to Reuters Rankings thanks to our academic paper publications, number of patents per year, and spin-offs. The university gathers a total of 60,000 students of which the faculty of medicine accounts for more than 9,000 – making it the largest faculty of KU Leuven's Group of biomedical sciences.

The university has a longstanding history in tech transfer and has a separate office for such activities called Leuven Research and Development that enables us to drive innovation. To give an example of our success, almost every HIV cocktail on the market today contain a KU Leuven developed molecule. We have been very successful in translation research and aim to continue in the future, ensuring our research can benefit patients on the market

How significant are research activities within the faculty of medicine?

Research is a major aspect for KU Leuven, as I said, we are the most innovative university in Europe, certainly research as its fair share in this position. In addition, we are also a member of the League of European Research University (LERU) which is one of the largest networks of research-intensive universities in Europe. Every professor that we have here in KU Leuven is involved in both educating students and conducting research projects. Education is grounded in excellent research.

How would describe the importance of collaboration at KU Leuven, for both internal and external partnerships?

KU Leuven wants to foster collaboration, first amongst our university researchers, and of course with outside stakeholders. Within the university, we promote collaboration across all departments and almost every research project is interdisciplinary.

Additionally, collaboration outside of the university is also promoted and fostered as highlighted by our more than 100 spin-offs. Aside from just delivering spin-offs establishing research collaborations with already existing companies can be a positive option when managing projects. The Leuven Research & Development office is very useful and efficient to this matter, as it is the legal entity for KU Leuven that is in charge of the research contracts for instance. We have also established frameworks to partner with the industry for training future professionals and working together on big data for the Leuven University Hospital.

The KU Leuven is also able to educate and train through its three-branch university hospital network, UZ Leuven. To what extent are conducting clinical trials an activity of the faculty of medicine and these hospitals?

KU Leuven has an important participation in clinical trials thanks to the facilities of our university hospital, UZ Leuven. We have many experts at the university in almost all clinical domains, for instance in oncology, neurology and cardiology. We are able to conduct approximately 1000 clinical trials per year for both in-house research and outside companies thanks to our clinical trials centre (CTC) which is in charge of the streamline of the processes to recruit patients for studies.

We also collaborate with the Vlaams Institute for Biotechnology (VIB), which is an organization funded by the Flemish government. Working closely with them enables us to boost specific innovative topics. Furthermore, we have an important history with the generic sector.

Indeed, there are areas in public health which we have a footprint where our research was translated. For instance, the Electronic Patient Record system used in Flemish hospitals to gather the data of patients was first beginning development in the 1990s at KU Leuven and is now available in 50 percent of Flemish hospitals.

Healthcare systems around the world are facing challenges of increasing chronic illness, ageing populations, and the rising cost of care. We are also seeing the rise of innovation such as immunotherapies and eHealth. In your view, what trends are having the most impact on healthcare and how is KU Leuven adapting to prepare its students for this new health paradigm?

Obviously, these ongoing trends and changes are impacting the way we teach and train our students.

First, the study of medicine in Belgium was reduced from seven to six years, which is a challenge and major change in the curriculum. Despite this, it is important to mention that our students were able to learn the same skills in this span of time and have equally satisfying results on the International Foundation of Medicine (IFOM) exam which we used as a benchmark. In addition, we are building programs to ensure more time for field differentiation for our students, to allow them to work on the grant challenges for the future. It is not possible to teach every piece of knowledge; we need to be specific. Thus, we are defining and distinguishing the core skills of each discipline.

Nowadays, young graduates follow careers in group practices which makes diversity in profiles important – both in background and knowledge. The fact that graduates do not pursue their own practice as often as in the past allows another way of teaching.

What objectives are you aiming to achieve during your tenure in the faculty as an educator of the next generation of health professionals?

Since I joined the board as Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at KU Leuven, I identified several priorities. First is to have the right mix of research and teaching in the faculty. To do this, we need a better understanding and appreciation of each other, especially between basic research and applied clinical research. Indeed, I think the knowledge, appreciation and collaboration of one-another in these fields are to the benefit of everyone as it creates complementary and added-value.

Furthermore, I would add that medicine is changing toward a direction in which patients are still willing to take part in clinical trials but want to make sure that their doctors are highly skilled. Going in this direction, we implemented a program to build a new skill centre for both technical and interprofessional communication abilities.

I started my career as a researcher; thus, I believe it is crucial to have top-level research. More than that, it is critical to bring students in contact with research very early on in their curriculum. Starting after the first year of their bachelor, we allow students with excellent records to start doing research. Every year, about 200 students start a voluntary program apart from their studies to be involved in the research. We have had enthusiastic feedback on this approach from students; it is a very successful program. Of course, as a research-intensive university, we must bring students to the research.

What would be the final message that you would like to pass on as the dean of the Faculty of Medicine at KU Leuven?

At KU Leuven, we are open and willing to impact the biomedical sciences world but also to have a positive impact on patients and society. Doing so is a result of collaborating between colleagues, either academics or non-academics, and companies in order to bring innovations where it belongs. It is important to translate research into the market and bring to the patients.

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