

# Interview with Dominique Demonte, Director, Biopark Charleroi Brussels South

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Could you tell our readers who are not familiar with the Biopark with an introduction of the Biopark and its institutes?

The BioPark of Charleroi Brussels South is a campus where major biomedical research infrastructures of the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) have been established since 1999. It was a political decision from the ULB to regroup various laboratories that were active in molecular biology. Naturally, the motivation for this is not only to strengthen our expertise in molecular biology but also to play an active role in the development of the Charleroi region.

The Institute of Molecular Biology and Medicine (IBMM) was ULB's first establishment, presented in 1999. In this centre, the teams of scientists focus on the molecular mechanisms that govern the biology of living beings and contribute to medical advances in the fight against diseases such as AIDS, cancer, allergies as well as sleeping sickness.

In 2004 we extended our footprint by creating the Institute for Medical Immunology (IMI), a research institute of the Medical Faculty of the ULB. This institute has been created on the basis of a "Private-Public Partnership" with GSK, ULB and the Walloon region. This partnership has provided sufficient financial support allowing the relocation of the former "Laboratoire d'Immunologie Expérimentale" into new facilities within the Biopark. It currently encompasses 800 m<sup>2</sup> of laboratory surfaces and 60 scientists working in the fields of immunostimulants, infant immunology, organ transplant and immunological biomarkers.

Five years later we also established a Centre for Microscopy and Molecular Imaging (CMMI). This multimodal imaging centre was born out of a partnership with ULB and the University of Mons and received financial support from both the Walloon region and the European Union. It is one of the few centres in Europe where all types of analysis "from individual molecules to small animals" can be performed in the same place. The CMMI is involved in all aspects of the Biopark's activity, acting both as a research centre, a technology base, and a training provider.

Furthermore, we have a collective research centre focusing on immunology. What makes this centre especially unique is its positioning as a place where fundamental and clinical research meet, combining to convert raw immunology into real medication.

Thus today, Biopark accommodates three academic institutes including 15 companies creating approximately 600 jobs. Half of these jobs are within the academic institutes, while the other half are within the individual companies.

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Looking at the companies located on the scientific park named Aeropole that includes Biopark, we have 800 people working in the biomedical field. This is an amazing feat especially when you consider that only 12 years ago there were absolutely no biotech activities in the region.

Moreover, we have more than 40 on-going partnerships with companies from Belgium and other European countries. For instance, we have a long tradition of collaboration with GSK where we have created an academic institute, a collective research centre and two companies.

Our objective is to put in place a complete innovation chain from an academic institute for research, tech-platform, tech-transfer, a training centre and companies that are predominantly spin-offs of the ULB.

One of the activities we are actively monitoring is the creation of companies. To do this we have established the Biopark Incubator, which is a business incubation that supports young scientific entrepreneurs throughout the development of their projects. Through this we have successfully managed to create 11 companies over the past 13 years. IGRETEC (The Charleroi's Regional development agency) has been a strong partner of the Biopark Incubator and has contributed financially to create two buildings dedicated to biotech companies. In addition to this, they have also assisted the Biopark in terms of project support and improving the Biopark's visibility both nationally and internationally.

Besides the spin-offs there have also been companies that have decided to come to Biopark to capitalize on our strengths in fields like immunology.

When you assumed your post as Director of the Biopark in early 2010, you stated that you preferred to call yourself a business developer and "intrapreneur". How do you differentiate the two and what would you say is an intrapreneur's vision?

I believe that "business developer" is a restrictive definition because in my role as director I promote not only businesses but also academic research projects and training seminars; in other words, I help to develop the campus. On the other hand, a business developer's sole objective is to generate revenues for a given company.

And as an intrapreneur I am within the University of Brussels assigned to a special project: to put in place the campus. My goal is to develop the campus like an entrepreneur would develop his business.

It is stated (on your website) that Biopark Charleroi Brussels South can today be considered a resounding success. In this respect, what would you say have been the main milestones and achievements of the Biopark since you assumed your role as Director/Business Developer since you took the reins in 2010?

An important milestone was the creation of a second research institute—the Institute for Medical Immunology. Initially, people were not too excited about relocating from Brussels to Charleroi, since at that time it seemed as a remote area without any scientific activities. Furthermore, it was believed that the attraction of talented pupils and scientific professionals would be difficult. Hence, this has been our first point of attention from the beginning.

The second step was to bring together expertise of researchers and academics from the University of Brussels and the University of Mons to provide an integrated and efficient preclinical imaging platform for the scientific community.

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In general, the key factors of our development have been the high level of research and teaching activities, the triple helix model (University-Industry-Government), the support of the Walloon Region and the EU, our integrated strategy and a strong collaborative network in the industry.

Broadly speaking, what is the value added of the Biopark in terms of incubating new companies, helping them to make the transition from scientific projects into commercial organizations?

Obviously, experience in the field is critical; something we have been able to build up over the years. Moreover, we have managed to establish a network of investors and managerial professionals. This is also crucial since every company that has good products requires a capable team and funding.

The key ingredients that have shaped the Biopark into a success are its network in the industry, good products and an qualified professionals.

Moreover, Biopark has established a training centre in 2009. This centre has been an enormous success with trainees that include staff from 30 different companies, universities and almost all Hautes Ecoles (High Schools) based in the Wallonie-Brussels Federation that provide biomedical related training courses. Our courses have also been attended by job seekers with 90% of them finding employment upon completion.

Do you believe the Biopark has achieved the level of success it deserves so far?

Our aim is to reach a higher level of international recognition. However, before we do that it is essential that we are well-organized on a local level and have a clear vision.

I believe it is Interesting to have interactions with other campuses that have scientists and companies which can add value to our research and/or companies.

To this end, we intend to create an environment that will provide the right incentives to attract the most talented researcher back to Belgium.

Is there a favourite past or on-going project or initiative hosted in the Biopark which you ideally embodies what the park stands for today?

Over the last years we have concluded many successful partnerships. An example is Delphi Genetics, a spin-off of the Institute of Molecular Biology and Medicine, which develops original genetic engineering solutions. This cooperation has shed light on technologies based on the understandings gained of how bacterial poison and antidote genes work.

Delphi Genetics started its operations from a small laboratory in 2001 and has since moved to a larger building and managed to conclude a number of partnerships with large international pharmaceutical companies such as GSK, Sanofi and Merck.

There are several examples of the campus such as Delphi Genetics but for me the most important is our integrated strategy focused on long term growth.

How do you deal with the challenges of attracting new companies particularly in the field of life sciences with so many other parks like the Liège Science Park in Wallonia and Arenberg Research-Park in Flanders?

Most of the companies on the Biopark are spin-offs that have been supported by our unique environment. Today, we have more than ten companies here that take advantage of the services and expertise available on the campus.

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However, attracting businesses from abroad remains a challenge. Nonetheless, we have the appropriate network and thus I believe that over the long term we will be able to invite start-ups to take advantage of our skilled labour, infrastructure and fiscal incentives.

As the director of the Biopark where would you like to take the Biopark in the next four to five years?

Main primary goal is to put in place a complete ecosystem that is capable of nurturing and growing innovative new businesses. Moreover we intend to attract experienced and qualified scientists that are capable of providing the opportunities to create a company and collaborate with large pharmaceutical companies such as UCB or Janssen, for instance.

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