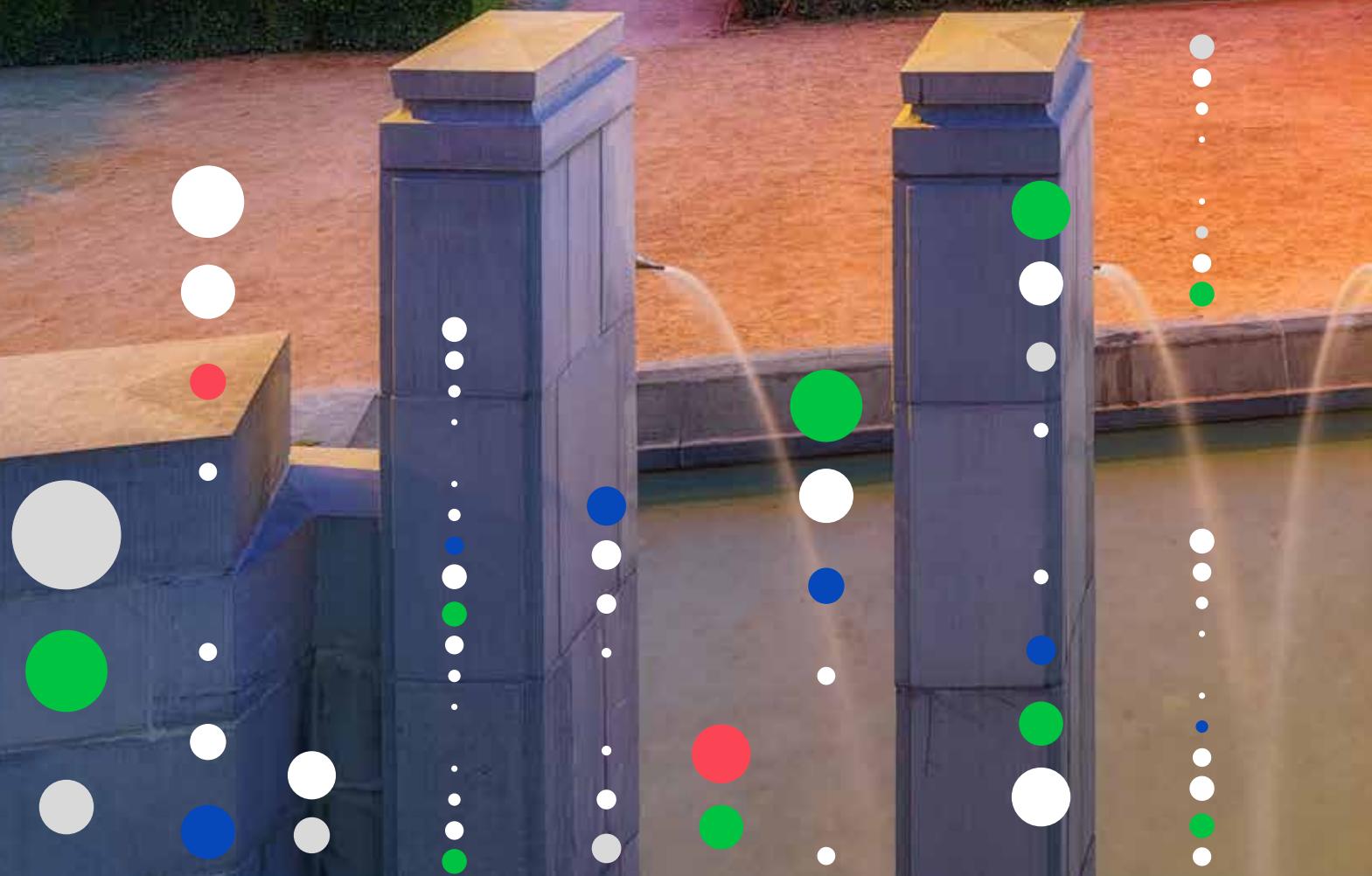




Focus on Belgium





Creating jobs through innovation

In a nutshell, the central focus of the Flanders VLAIO programme, ‘Digital Future’, is formed by four main drivers: Start Digital, Artificial Intelligence, Cybersecurity and Industry 4.0. “The job of our agency,” explains Frederik de Vusser, advisor at VLAIO for innovation projects in the private sector and in public research bodies, “is to help companies in the Flanders region to be among the best in the world. And thereby create jobs.”



It's good to see that our spearheads in Flanders and those of ITEA are on the same page in many ways – Smart energy, Smart mobility, Smart health and so on.

Strategic spearheads

VLAIO is the Flanders Innovation & Entrepreneurship Agency, and was the subject of the Country Focus article in 2019 (<https://itea4.org/article/itea-magazine-32-country-focus-belgium.html>). To recap, VLAIO still focuses on the strategic spearheads of stimulating growth and innovation through grants to business, promoting entrepreneurship, working with strong partners that assist SMEs, providing cluster support to help companies galvanise cooperation and dynamics within a group of enterprises and knowledge institutions, and improving environmental factors through enabling the development of industrial areas. From a funding perspective policy little has changed, although the bottom-up based funding has increased quite substantially, amounting to 270 million euros in 2021.

An essential part of VLAIO's support efforts lies in the cooperation with strategic research centres, or SOCs. De Vusser: "Like the world-class imec research centre in the field of nanoelectronics. It is here that ICT, software, hardware and nanotech find their expression in an integrated approach towards industry. Add to this initiatives such as Flanders Make (industry 4.0), Flux50 (smart energy), Blauwe Cluster (sustainable blue economy), Catalisti (chemistry), SIM (materials), Flanders' Food (nutrition) and flanders.healthTech (health), you can get an idea of the spread of efforts being made to support our companies in their markets."

From problem to opportunity

"Of course," says De Vusser, "a lot has happened between 2019 and today. The corona crisis threw a spanner in the works of a lot of companies but, on the other hand, the need for far-reaching digitalisation became very evident. You only have to look at the rapid advancements made by ICT in video and online conferencing, for instance, to see just how vital software and the digitalisation process have become in this new world. Some companies embraced the problem and turned it into an opportunity, so much so that at the exit of the crisis they have come out stronger, more innovative and prosperous. If we look at software innovation, I think that the major trend over the past couple of pandemic years has been in XR (virtual and augmented reality). We've seen a lot of successful start-ups by students coming out of academia. And these are not only in games but also education (e-learning). Blue (water-based) technologies is another significant development that demands software innovation. But even established strong



technologies that have been around in Belgium for some time, like logistics, mobility and health, are becoming increasingly 'smarter', and so also in need of software innovation. This has simply underscored the centrality of the role played by software and ICT in finding solutions."

Brainstorming innovation

But the virtual solutions do have their limits, De Vusser feels. "Within organisations, this kind of communication seems to work effectively and efficiently. However, when it comes to collaboration, particularly on an international level, you realise that screens cannot compensate for the informal coffee-break moments that help forge relationships. Despite all the innovation in bits and bytes, you can't beat beverages and bites to make things happen. Real innovation occurs when you brainstorm. Someone presents an idea, others chip in with contributions and something new materialises. That's the essence of collaboration."

Elbow-bumping

While the focus of VLAIO is firmly fixed on the local situation, ITEA plays a prominent role in the collaboration mechanism that is so important for Flemish companies in the international playing field. "After two years of being online, it will be really good to get back offline and literally meet face-to-face, handshake or elbow-bump. With 'real' physical meetings due in Brussels in a couple of weeks [at the time of writing], I think it will be interesting to see how people manage physical contact again. They say that old habits die hard but what about new habits?"

Keep coming back

"I'm really hoping that the forthcoming PO Days will generate plenty of collaboration and new projects. After all, there are plenty of topics in the area of sustainability where we need innovation in the coming years. Joint Eureka Clusters Calls in sustainability and AI are key areas that are aligned with our local targets and we have quite a significant budget to allocate to those topics where we are very keen to focus our efforts. It's good to see that our spearheads in Flanders and those of ITEA are on the same page in many ways – Smart energy,

Brussels-Capital region

For project partners located in the Brussels-Capital region, funding application are handled by Innoviris. Innoviris is the Brussels Institute for the encouragement of scientific research and innovation set out to create an active, competitive, innovative Brussels-Capital Region supported by knowledge.

Innoviris' funding criteria for ITEA project partners:

- Develop all or some of its activities within the territory covered by the Brussels-Capital region.
- Present an innovative RD&I project likely to have a favourable impact on employment and sustainable (environmental and societal) development of the Brussels-Capital region.
- Show one's ability to finance one's share in the project and not being in difficulty, in accordance with the European legislation.
- Have fulfilled its obligations in the context of previous support initiatives allocated by the region.

More information

<https://innoviris.brussels/eureka-clusters>

Smart mobility, Smart health and so on. There is still plenty of enthusiasm among Flemish companies and organisations to be part of ITEA projects, and larger companies like Siemens and Barco keep coming back, always trying to bring other, small companies along with them to be part of the ITEA ecosystem."

Innovation for sustainable employment

An essential rationale of VLAIO is to help create jobs through innovation. "Innovation is a means to create sustainable employment," De Vusser states. "So when we look at the collaboration projects, we are keen to assess the impact on employment as well as on society and the sustainability targets. In measuring the impact, we first evaluate the feasibility of the project goals and then look at how much employment is generated by participation. So, we have a start and end moment. Of course, sometimes innovation is required to sustain employment at the same level. It can be as much of a challenge to prevent decline, let alone boost jobs. But what is indisputable is that innovation is indispensable."

More information

<https://www.vlaio.be/eureka>