

Wallonia – Texas: A Unique Partnership between a top University in Sciences and Technology and an Economic Development Agency. Birth of a global network of innovation.

Because wider collaboration of regions is required today to respond to the challenge of innovation, the Wallonia Export and Investment Agency (AWEX) has signed an agreement with a prestigious American university Texas A&M with the primary objective of increasing the knowledge expertise in Wallonia and facilitating Walloon innovative enterprises access into the US market.

Both regions possess great capabilities to stimulate the creation of innovation: there are 9 universities in Wallonia, spending on average €480 millions annually, and about 300 R&D centres; meanwhile Texas A&M System is a renowned university in the United States in the field of sciences and technologies. The entire system comprises 18 universities and state agencies, for a total of 105.000 students and 26.00 employees. Research expenditures at Texas A&M amounts to more than \$600 million per year; ranking the System among the three universities devoting the largest budget to research and development in the United States. Texas A&M and the Walloon Region also possess a number of common fields of excellence; namely, life sciences, engineering, aerospace and the agro-food sector.

Objectives and vision:

The existing cooperation between Wallonia and Texas A&M fulfils several objectives. Firstly, it aims at building global companies through the simultaneous commercialisation of new technologies in Europe and the United States, developed within the Texas A&M System and universities or enterprises in Wallonia. Secondly, it facilitates the penetration of Walloon start-ups in the US market by providing them the right to use services provided by Texas A&M Office of Technology Commercialisation, its research parks and incubator; together with a privileged access to the university network. The Walloon Export and Investment Agency provides in returns assistance to start-ups of its American partner willing to enter the European market via the Walloon Region. AWEX and Texas A&M also collaborate to link companies in Wallonia and the United States for the creation of technological or commercial partnerships. Finally, the agreement seeks to prospect multinationals in the field of R&D in order to present them their respective research capabilities.

AWEX and Texas A&M System have together the long term vision of building a global innovation network to help technologies developed in Wallonia or Texas access faster new markets. They are currently considering the possibilities of developing similar relationships with institutions in China, India, Qatar and South Africa.

Resources available:

Two employees are working for this initiative in Wallonia, together with a number of employees at the Office of Technology Commercialization of Texas A&M.

Main obstacles and problems

It required some time for the program to come to concrete results as it was necessary to build a strong and trustworthy relationship between the two partners. Today's challenge consists of increasing the visibility of this opportunity among Walloon enterprises and research centres.

Performance and main achievements:

In March 2009, a joint venture agreement was signed between two spin-outs - one from Texas A&M and the other from the University of Namur in Wallonia - possessing complementary technologies in the field of bio-informatics. The joint venture allows them to improve their respective competences and target together much valuable contracts. It also aims at making their activities more efficient; each serving clients that are present in their continents.

From this year on, AWEX will organise every year a mission in Texas. Each mission will be preceded by the visit of a member of the Texas A&M Office of Technology Commercialization. The first edition was held in September- October 2009 and attracted 14 Walloon companies. All participants made very good contacts and several contracts were also concluded. A Walloon company active in the production of genetically modified mice signed a service agreement with the Texas Institute for Genomic Medicine, and two companies from Wallonia have created a company with Texas A&M developing techniques to optimise the exploitation of oilfields.

A large number of other potential collaborations have also been under discussion and could open the door to the development of new partnerships in the near future.